NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

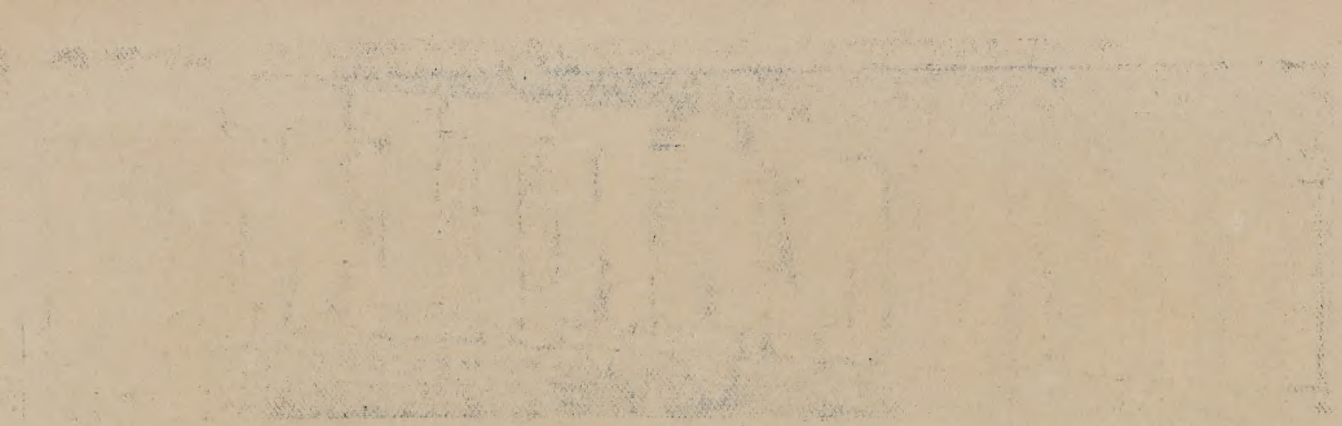
No. 482 NEW YORK, MARCH 24, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

DEMA, THE DANGEROUS

OR NICK CARTER'S CHASE TO PARIS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

With lightning-like quickness, Nick Carter raised Imogene in his arms and dropped her over behind the couch where she would be shielded from being shot.



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Dema, the Dangerous;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CHASE TO PARIS.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF IMOGENE.

Nick Carter was reading a letter, just received.

"Dear Mr. Carter," it began. "May I request that you come here in person with the least possible delay? I have the most heartrending intelligence to give you; your young ward, Imogene Clancy, has mysteriously disappeared. I have not the ability, nor the heart, to write the particulars in a letter, so I beg that you will come at once."

The letter was signed, "Sincerely yours, Madame Duclos"; and the engraved letter-head announced that the missive had originated at "The Sunnyside Institution of Learning for Young Ladies. Madame Celeste Duclos, Proprietor and Preceptress."

It was rather more fulsome than that, too, for it went on to describe, almost after the manner of a prospectus, that the said institution was the very best of its kind in the world; that it was located on a high bluff which overlooked the beautiful Hudson River; that the institution was conducted on the plan of convent schools without the religious restrictions that were imposed upon the pupils at such places—and so forth, ad libitum.

And a few words of explanation are necessary before we delve into the mystery with which the detective was presently confronted.

The young girl—Imogene Clancy—now in her eighteenth year, was indeed the ward of Nick Carter. He had, long ago, consented to assume the responsibility of the stewardship, at the request of the court, and he had placed the girl in the charge and care of Madame Duclos.

The causes which led up to this stewardship were somewhat complex, and a sufficient explanation for the purposes of our story is to the effect that in the pursuit of his profession the detective, in solving a murder mystery, had unwittingly come upon this responsibility.

A young woman, very recently a mother, had been

murdered in a house in Twenty-third Street, in the city of New York. The child of the murdered woman was at that time less than a month old, and it survived the death of its mother only two weeks.

Had the child been spared, it would ultimately have inherited a fortune of almost two millions from the estate of its father, who had died several months before its birth; but the death of the infant heir had thrown the inheritance to a child aunt—a very young sister of the father; and it appeared that this young girl, the inheritor of so vast a fortune, had not a living relative in the world.

The laws of the State where the property was located, and where Imogene was born, proclaimed that a female came "of age" at eighteeen, and therefore she was to come into the possession of her estates on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday—which, at the time of the receipt of the letter cited above, was only three months away.

Imogene Clancy was the sister of John Clancy, who had married Dora Chrisholm; and Dora Chrisholm was the murdered woman before referred to. She had been done to death by her twin sister, Dema, who in turn was aided and abetted by one Captain Chester Mayne.*

It was because of Nick Carter's connection with the murder case, which was recorded on his books as "The Padlocked Mystery," that the court, when it appeared that Imogene had no living relative, had requested the detective to assume the responsibility, and it was because of the detective's strong sympathies, and the appealing eyes of the young and friendless girl, that Nick Carter had consented to do so.

This explains why the letter from the preceptress of the school referred to Imogene Clancy as "your young ward."

At the time of the receipt of the letter by the detective, Imogene had been not quite two years at Madame Duclos' school, and during that time Nick Carter had seen her only once in three months, so, although his ward and his care, the detective had really very little acquaintance with the young lady.

Nevertheless, the few times that he had seen her, he had been strangely attracted by her winsomely beautiful face, her glorious eyes so full of promise, and her sweet and tender, though somewhat fiery, nature.

"Chick!" he called, when he had grasped the meaning of the letter; and at once the chief assistant, who was seated at the opposite side of the room, rose and approached his chief.

"What is it?" he asked; and the detective gave the short letter into his hands.

"Read that," he said. "And now, tell me what you think of it."

*See No. 481 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Padlocked Mystery."

"It would appear that Imogene has——"

Chick interrupted himself, and came to an abrupt pause.

"Well?" asked the detective.

"You are going up there, of course?" replied Chick.

"Certainly. What were you about to remark, Chick?"

The assistant shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid that there isn't much logic in what I was about to say," he said.

"Never mind the logic. Tell me what it was. Sometimes there is real inspiration in those sudden ideas that come to us—and especially in those which on second thought we regard as not worth mentioning. What were you going to say?"

"I was about to suggest that before you started for the school of Madame Duclos, it would not do any harm to find out just the one person in the world who would be most interested in the disappearance of this young heiress."

"Eh? Do you mean Dema Chrisholm?"

"Yes. I mean Dema Chrisholm. You see, Nick, we have both been absent from the city almost all of the time since 'The Padlocked Mystery' affair, and neither of us has kept any track of the case. I know that I have not made a note about it in the journal. Do you know anything about the condition of the case?"

"No; only that—— What do you mean, Chick? Are you suggesting that there is any possibility that Dema the Dangerous, as she was known in Paris, has escaped, and that this disappearance of Imogene is due to—to her?"

"Why, yes. Resolved down to a few words, I suppose that is precisely what I do mean."

"How could that woman have escaped?"

"I don't suppose that she *has* escaped—that is, from the authorities of this country. But my last recollection of the condition of affairs in connection with the padlocked mystery was that France had made an international matter out of it, and had asked for the extradition of Dema Chrisholm—or, as she was known over there, Dema—Demarest—and of Chester Mayne. Don't you remember that although we had good and sufficient proof of their crimes to send them both to the electric chair, France demonstrated to the New York State authorities through the department of state at Washington that there were a dozen crimes against them in Paris for which they might both be guillotined—and that if this country would consent to return them to France for trial, their execution would not only be assured and the expense of their trial saved to the State of New York, but also that such a proceeding would be the means—and the only means—of breaking up a gang of murderers and thieves which has terrorized Paris for several years? Don't you remember that?"

"Yes. I do recall it now."

"Do you happen to know if the two, or if either of them was given up to France?"

"No; I do not."

"Don't you think it would be worth your while to find out?"

"Yes. Most certainly."

"Then, if you wish to catch that ten-forty train for Madame Duclos' place, I will attend to this end of it."

"All right, Chick, I wish you would. I shall be back by nightfall, I think; or if not, I will communicate with you by telephone."

It was just noon when Nick Carter arrived at the school from which Imogene had disappeared, and he found the madame waiting for him anxiously.

"I am so glad you came, Mr. Carter," she said at once, conducting him into the library and carefully closing the door. "My letter must have mystified you greatly."

"It told me only that Imogene had disappeared. I might have wished that you had been somewhat more explicit. Your letter was written this morning. Tell me now when and how my young ward was missed."

"She disappeared during the night," replied the madame, speaking rapidly. "We missed her this morning. You are aware that Imogene roomed alone? That you insisted that she should do so, when you brought her here?"

"Yes; that is one of my hobbies; that all young people should have rooms to themselves."

"She did not appear when the breakfast bell rang this morning. She had always been most punctual, and I was surprised. It was because of her usual punctuality that I went to her room myself in search of her."

"Well?"

"She was not there, sir."

"I have already guessed that much," said the detective dryly.

"Her bed had not been used; that is to say, it did not have the appearance of having been occupied during the entire night. It looked rather as if she had opened it, and had gotten into the bed for a time without removing her clothing."

"You mean, I suppose, that it was her intention merely to give the bed the appearance of having been occupied?"

"Yes. Just that."

"Well?"

"It looked as if she had merely rested her head upon the pillow, and had not really occupied the bed more than a few moments. There are three windows in the room, as you know. You remember, do you not?"

"Perfectly."

"One of the windows was open. The blinds were also open and the curtain had been raised."

"Well?"

"A rope into which knots had been tied so that they were a few inches apart dangled from the window to the ground outside. It had been tied firmly to one of the legs of the bed, inside the room."

"What more?"

"A dress suit case, with which you had provided her, is missing. With it, much of Imogene's clothing, all her trinkets and jewels and keepsakes are gone. That photograph of yourself, which she seemed to prize very highly, remains on her bureau where she was in the habit of keeping it, and——"

"She did not take my picture, eh?"

"No, sir."

"You were about to add, I suppose, that every appearance of the matter goes to show that Imogene has run away, eh?"

"I can imagine no other explanation for her disappearance, Mr. Carter."

"Things look almost as if she had eloped, do they not?"

"Decidedly so."

"And yet, you are supposed to keep fairly good watch over the conduct of your charges, are you not, madame?"

"I am, and I do. I can truthfully say to you, sir, that I have had not the least suspicion that Imogene had even an acquaintance outside the school. I do not know that she had even a bowing acquaintance with any young man; nor do any of her schoolmates. I have questioned them all, very closely."

"Indeed! I hope, madame, that you have had the forethought to leave things inside the room, and outside it, also, exactly as you found them."

"I have done so, sir. I was particular about that, being aware of your profession."

"Very good. If you will lead the way now, we will go to Imogene's room."

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGE WOMAN AT THE GATE.

The condition of the room was exactly as the madame had described it, but when that truly worthy woman would have followed the detective into the apartment, he motioned her to remain near the door until he had made his examination.

His first attention was given to the knotted rope, which led from one of the legs of the bed, out through the open window to the ground.

He discovered, very much to his surpise, that the rope had been fastened to the leg of the bed by means of a knot which is known to sailors as a bowline, and he turned to the madame at once.

"Do you instruct your pupils here in the art of tying sailor knots?" he asked. "I mean by that any sort of knots that are used by sailors?"

"No, sir," she replied, surprised at the question.

"Do you happen to have the daughter of a sailor among your pupils?"

"No, sir."

"This rope has been fastened to the bedstead with a bowline," he continued. "It is not the sort of knot that a young lady would know how to make unless she had been especially taught."

"It is possible," ventured madame, "that her lover might have been a sailor."

"Ah! You cling to the idea of an elopement, do you?"

"It is the only explanation I have to offer, sir."

"And yet you admit that you know absolutely nothing that would lead you to such a conclusion, save that Imogene has disappeared?"

"Nothing more than that—and the presence of the rope together with the absence of the articles of clothing and other things that have disappeared with her."

"You were, I suppose, quite familiar with Imogene's wardrobe—and also with everything that she possessed?"

"Yes, sir, but more than that, I keep lists of the possessions of all my charges."

"So, in this case, you know to a certainty exactly what has disappeared with her?"

"Yes, sir, to a certainty."

"Tell me exactly what they are."

Madame Duclos produced a list and unctiously read aloud from it the names of the articles that had disappeared from the room with their owner, and the detective listened attentively.

He made no comment when the reading was completed, and madame asked:

"What do you think about that list, sir?"

"I think that it does you great credit, madame. You appear to know, almost to the value of a pin, what is gone."

"I do, sir."

"And it strikes me that the articles are all more or less necessary to the taking of a journey, are they not?"

"Precisely so. That fact impressed me, also."

"And the trinkets? Don't you think that she has shown less ingenuity in the selection of such articles as were *not* necessary to her?"

"I don't think I quite understand you, sir."

"Well, do you notice the etching that hangs on the wall over her desk?"

"Yes."

"Have you never discovered that she was very fond of that?"

"Yes, indeed I have."

"Do you not think it rather remarkable that she did not take that with her? It is one of the very few things that she had here with her that is associated with her life before she became a member of your school. And there is my picture; she always seemed rather fond of that, also."

"She did, sir."

"And here, on the bureau, is a small manicure set which I gave to her at her last birthday. She professed great admiration for it at the time."

"She used it constantly. I know that she always showed it with pride whenever there was an occasion to do so, and it was her habit to say that her Uncle Nicholas gave it to her on her seventeenth birthday."

"Don't you think it remarkable that she did not take that?"

"I do—really."

The detective approached the bed and examined it critically, then he gave his attention again the the bowline with which the rope was fastened to the bed; then he looked in each of the drawers of the bureau, he noticed the positions of the chairs in the room, he examined closely into the contents of a small escritoire that rested upon a small round table at one corner of the room, he approached the window and looked from it at the ground outside, he studied the position of the rope where it passed across the sill of the window, he examined that with his magnifying-glass, he took the rope in his hand and drew it toward him until he held in his hand the end that had rested on the ground, studying it carefully as he did so, after which he dropped it again out of the window.

Then he turned with a smile to the madame.

"I will go outside in the grounds now," he said. "In the meantime, I wish you would assemble your pupils, in order that I may see them all together—all of them, if you please. I shall wish to ask them a few questions."

"Very good, sir."

"Where shall I find you, with the pupils, when I reenter the house—say in ten or fifteen minutes?"

"In the assembly-room. You know where that is?"

"Yes."

"Shall you require also the presence of my corps of teachers?"

"Later—yes. I do not wish any of the instructors present when I interview the young ladies; but after them, the teachers; and after them—the servants, if you please."

The detective passed out of the house then, and was absent, as he had said he would be, about fifteen minutes.

There was a frown on his face and an intent look in his eyes when he returned, but he made no comment concerning what he had discovered. When the madame questioned him, he replied evasively, remarking presently:

"We will discuss that together a little later, madame. I will see the pupils now, if you please."

There were thirty of them in all, and they ranged in ages from fourteen to twenty. Beautiful, bright, winsome young folk they were, too, and among them, as Nick looked them keenly over, he did not detect a face

that was not filled with wonder and alarm over the disappearance of their companion.

"There is no guilty knowledge here, that is certain," was the detective's mental comment; "but that there is an accomplice somewhere in this school, among the instructors or the servants, I am as certain as if I already knew it."

Aloud, he said:

"Well, young ladies, this is rather a remarkable circumstance which brings us together, do you not agree with me?"

There was a murmur of assent all around the room.

"Do any of you happen to know how to tie a bowline?" he demanded suddenly, and somewhat irrelevantly; and they gazed at him in amazement.

"It is a kind of knot that is tied with a rope. Do you, or any of you, know what a bowline is?"

A negative murmur answered the question.

"If any one of you has ever heard of a bowline, please say so."

Silence greeted this question.

"Now, which one of you was the most intimate friend of Imogene?"

A tall, beautiful girl stood up in her place and then came forward.

"I think I was her most intimate friend, sir," she said in a gentle voice. "I love Imogene very dearly. We had perfect confidence in each other. Such small secrets as we had, we always shared."

"Ah! You are Miss Isabel Power, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Imogene always mentioned you in her letters to me. Tell me, Isabel, do you know of any reason whatever why Imogene should have run away from the school?"

"None whatever, sir, and I do not believe that she did run away."

"Do you know how she regarded the school and her environment here?"

"I know, sir, that she was quite happy. She loved madame, as we all do. She loved her teachers—that is, all save one, and that one she did not dislike particularly. I refer to Mademoiselle Duprez, our instructor in music."

"Imogene did not like her, eh?"

"I don't think that she really *disliked* the mademoiselle, sir, but she did not trust her. That is all. She used to say that she did the mademoiselle an injustice; but you asked me if she was happy, and I wish to assure you that she was. I don't believe that Imogene has run away."

"No? Then what do you believe?"

"That she was stolen away, sir."

"Abducted? Without her consent?"

"Decidedly so, sir."

"By whom?"

"Alas, sir, I do not know."

"For what purpose?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"Have you anything upon which you base your belief, save the one conviction that you do not believe that Imogene would run away?"

"Nothing."

"Do you know what acquaintances she had outside the school?"

"She had none. We none of us have any. Madame is very particular about that, and we are so contented here that we are quite satisfied with each other."

"Do you know if Imogene has had any correspondence with any young man?"

"I am sure that she has not, because I would have known about it if she had."

"You think she would have told you?"

"I am sure of it."

"Did she ever talk with you about young men—or about any particular young man? She might have known one before she came to this school, you know."

"Girls always talk more or less about boys, sir. Young men are the mysteries in every young girl's imagination, but Imogene referred to them only collectively. I have never heard her refer to any particular one."

"Do you think she received any letters of which the madame was not cognizant."

"I know that she did not."

"Has Imogene mentioned to you any interview that she might have had with a stranger, at any time since you have known each other? Think, now. I wish a definite reply to that question."

"Yes, sir. She has. It was a week ago or more when she told me that while she was searching for a lost golf-ball near the gate, a strange lady had spoken to her through the bars—you know it is a tall iron gate that is always kept locked, not to keep us in, but to keep strangers out?"

"Yes."

"She said that a strange woman had spoken to her through the gate, but the woman had merely asked her a few trivial questions about the school and had ended by asking Imogene her name."

"And what did she say especially about the strange woman, which caused you to remember it, please?"

"Merely that the lady was very beautiful—the most beautiful woman, and the most richly dressed, that she had ever seen, and that she had the softest, gentlest, and most musical voice she had ever heard. Imogene was quite taken with her, and frequently expressed the hope that the beautiful woman would come again."

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER'S LITTLE TRAP.

"Do you mean," asked Nick, "that the strange woman had succeeded in making some impression upon Imogene

that caused her to remember her?"

"Yes; I think that was it. She often expressed the wish that I could see the lady, and once she made the remark that she could not get the idea out of her head that the strange lady was destined to be mixed up some how in her future."

"In Imogene's future?"

"Yes."

"Was that idea the result of anything that the woman had said to her?"

"I do not think so. I am inclined to think it was based upon nothing stronger than mere fancy."

"Did you ever see that woman, Isabel?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know if Imogene knew her name?"

"I don't think she did, sir."

"Now, when did you last see Imogene?"

"I was with her when the retiring bell rang, last night."

"That was at nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

"You left here, then?"

"To go to my own room—yes."

"Did you hear any noise, or any disturbance in the night?"

"No, sir."

"Did any of you young ladies hear a noise during the night?"

Not one of them had done so.

"Now, do any of you think of anything which, in the light of this strange disappearance, you believe I ought to know?"

There was a general negative from all, and a moment later the detective dismissed them.

"I will see the teachers now, if you please," he said to the madame, and the corps of instructors was called into the room.

It will not be necessary to give in detail the examination to which the detective subjected them, for he gained nothing from it, but as they were leaving the room, he called to mademoiselle to remain a moment, and when she returned toward him he asked:

"Were you fond of Imogene, mademoiselle?"

"Very, monsieur, although I do not think she was enamored of me."

"No? Had she any reason to dislike you?"

"Not at all, monsieur. I was always kind to her, and considerate for her."

"How long is it since you have lived in Paris, mademoiselle?"

"Three years, sir."

"Did you have, while you resided there, a certain Madame Demarest among your list of acquaintances?"

The detective asked the question quite suddenly, and for an instant he thought he observed an almost imperceptible start on the part of the mademoiselle; but it was so faint and so vague that he was not sure that it had been there at all.

"No," she replied.

"Or a gentleman named Mayne? Chester Mayne?"

"I have never heard the name before, sir."

"Where is your sleeping-room located, in this house, mademoiselle?"

"It adjoins the one occupied by Miss Imogene," was the reply.

"Thank you. That will do. I am much obliged to you. But stay!"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear any noise or any disturbance of any description, at any time during the night?"

"I did not."

"Do you think, if there had been an unusual noise, such as a scream, for instance, proceeding from Imogene's room, you would have heard it?"

"I am sure that I would, sir."

"You are, then, a light sleeper?"

"Very."

"Did you sleep well, or ill last night?"

"I slept badly, sir. I was awake most of the night."

"Indeed! Thank you. I will not trouble you any longer."

When the mademoiselle had gone from the room the detective interrupted the questions he would have been asked, by calling for the servants, and after a moment or two they filed into the room.

There were seven of them, and Nick looked them over carefully, without speaking for some time, until they all began to twitch nervously, and when he did speak, what he said was a surprise to them all. He said:

"I wish you all to be seated here and wait where you are until my return. You two men may return to your duties at once, but I wish the women to remain here. Shall I tell you why I wish that?"

There was no answer, but all looked expectantly at him; he continued:

"One of you—I think I already know which one—left the house last night and went into the grounds around it. There was a slight sprinkle of rain during the night—not enough to lay the dust, but enough to spot it; enough also, so that the person who walked along the path which leads through the shrubbery from the greenhouse to the small gate at the end of the garden wall left a perceptible trace of footsteps there.

"That person was among you, and my remarks now are addressed to that one.

"You admitted two persons to the grounds at that small gate——"

"Why, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Madame Duclos, "that gate has not been opened since I lived in this house. The key to it is in my room and has never been out of my possession, and more than that, if a stranger did

possess the key, it would still be impossible to open the gate, for the reason that immediately after I assumed possession here I had the gate sealed shut with iron rivets. Nobody could have entered the grounds by that gate, sir."

"I know all that, madame," replied the detective. "I did not state that anybody had been admitted to the grounds *through* the gate, but *at* the gate. They came over the gate by means of a double step-ladder, which was conveyed to them by one of these women.

"Now, madame, the woman who carried the step-ladder to that gate, and who left her tracks in the soil of the path, wore no shoes upon her feet, so somewhere, among the effects of one of these women, you will find, if you search, a pair of stockings that will——"

One of the servants started to her feet—and then suddenly relapsed into the chair again. But Nick Carter turned to her quickly.

"Ah!" he said. "So you are the one who did it, are you?"

The woman preserved a sullen silence.

"You were paid in gold," continued the detective, smiling. "You were paid for your services in English gold, and when, after returning to your room, you counted it, you discovered that there was just a half-sovereign less than you had been promised, didn't you?"

The woman's jaw dropped, and she could only stare at the detective.

It was at once apparent to everybody in the room that the detective was correct, the demeanor of the woman sufficiently attested to that, but nevertheless she shut her jaws tightly together, and the detective knew that he had to do with one of those dogged characters which can keep absolute silence under all circumstances.

"I shall search for and find those other half-sovereigns, and I shall search for and find the stockings that you wore," continued the detective. "After that, if you do not tell me the whole truth about the proceedings last night, and who the persons were that you admitted to the grounds, I shall put you under arrest."

The woman laughed in his face.

"Much good it will do you," she replied. "I am an English woman. I have had seven half-sovereigns in my possession, saved from my last service on the other side, before I came to this place to work—I have had them in my possession ever since I have been in this house; and as for the stockings—you may search for them—or not—as you please."

"So you were paid four pounds for your assistance, were you? Eight half-sovereigns—twenty dollars. And you dropped one of the gold pieces where I found it. What is your name?"

"None of your business. Madame can tell you, if she pleases," was the pert reply.

"Her name is Jane Golden," murmured madame, who was too shocked to speak with emphasis, but as the name was uttered, the detective saw the ghost of a grin steal across the face of the woman, and he remarked instantly:

"That, madame, is the name by which you know her. It is not, however, her true name."

"You think you are mighty smart, don't you?" sneered Jane Golden.

Nick did not reply, but he approached the woman quickly, and before she was aware of what he intended to do, he had snapped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists.

She started to her feet as he did so, but he quickly forced her back into the chair again, and this time, with another pair of irons, he locked one of her wrists to the chair in which she was seated.

"You will remain where you are now," he said grimly, "unless you take the chair with you when you go, and I think you will find it rather heavy, Jane."

It has been said that when a woman curses she can give a man cards and spades and beat him at that, and just now Nick Carter had proof positive of the assertion. But he paid no attention to her tirade, and employed the time, while she was busy, in addressing the others.

"Do any of you happen to know about this errand of Jane Golden's, last night?" he asked.

There was a general dissent, and Nick saw that they were truthful about it; accordingly he dismissed them at once.

"You may go," he said, and then, when they were gone, and Jane had exhausted her supply of curses, he turned to her.

"Will you tell me now about what you did last night?" he demanded.

"I will tell you nothing," she replied doggedly.

"You prefer to go to prison, do you?"

She laughed in his face again.

"You cannot take me to prison for what you charge," she said, sneering. "You can prove nothing. I deny all that you say—all of it. What can you prove Nothing, Do your worst. I defy you."

Nick turned toward the madame and addressed her in French. What he said is of no consequence for the reason that he employed that language simply to discover if the woman who called herself Jane Golden understood it, and he was instantly satisfied that she did, for she turned her eyes quickly and listened eagerly to what he said.

"So," remarked Nick, smiling, "you have also been in France, have you? I strongly suspect, Jane Golden, that you are not what you seem. At all events, I shall keep you where you——"

"You can't keep me. There is no law in the world that will enable you to hold me upon the trivial and trumped-up charge that you are making."

"Oh! Isn't there? You are remarkably well informed, are you not? And your language seems to have improved

greatly during the last few moments. Those hands of yours, which I just now fastened together, do not look as if they had been always accustomed to menial employment."

"You cannot hold me. There is no law——"

"I do not require a law. I am a law unto myself. You will remain my prisoner, all the same. Do not doubt that. When I want you I will want you badly, and I propose to have you where I can put a hand on you. And—Miss Jane—I don't think it would be at all a bad idea for me to have you measured over by the Bertillon system, while you are in my possession, so to speak, and to send the measurements to the chief of the secret service of Paris. I really believe——"

But he was interrupted by another string of curses, worse, infinitely, than the former.

"Madame," said Nick quietly, and in French, "we have found a prize here, I think. This woman is an old offender against the French laws, and is badly wanted in Paris—unless I am very greatly mistaken. At all events——"

"You lie!" exclaimed Jane Golden; and the detective laughed outright.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY OF THE ABDUCTION.

As soon as the detective and Madame Duclos were alone, he told her what he had discovered during his investigation of the premises.

"To begin with," he said, "I was convinced, almost as soon as I entered Imogene's room, that she, in person, had nothing whatever to do with the packing of her possessions—the things that were taken away with her.

"That was evident because so many trivial articles the we know she loved were left behind when they might easily have been taken along.

"Again, I was assured, because of the character of the knot by which the rope was tied to the bed, that another person than herself had been in the room; you might assert that the other person was the lover—that is, the supposed lover with whom you have thought she eloped, but that view of the case is palpably impossible. While the bowline is an easy knot to tie by one who has been taught how to do it, it is of extreme difficulty to one who is not entirely familiar with it.

"It is also evident to me that two persons other than Imogene were in this room at some time during last night."

"Two, sir?"

"Yes. Let me here ask you a question."

"Well?"

"You have been the proprietor of this establishment for several years?"

"Yes."

"And is it not safe to say that during your life here there has never been a cigar smoked in the room?"

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur!* I——"

"That is sufficient reply," said Nick, smiling. "Of course I knew that to be a fact, but nevertheless if you will step over close to the window"—they were carrying on their discussion in Imogene's room—"and will look carefully, you will find that there are several flakes of cigar ashes on the carpet near to it."

"Do you mean," inquired the madame, "that a man not only had the effrontery to enter this room during the night to assist in the abduction of Imogene, but that he also dared to smoke a cigar while he was here? To my mind that looks like the quintescence of impertinence."

"Oh, no. I do not mean exactly that. What I do mean is that a man was here, that doubtless he carried a half-smoked cigar, long since extinguished, in his teeth. There are many men who do that thing habitually. It is only another form of chewing tobacco.

"You see, madame, Imogene was rendered unconscious by chloroform——"

"How do you know that, sir?"

"I know that she was unconscious, and that chloroform was the most likely agent they could use to render her so. I was about to add that the rope was used to lower her from the window and that the man performed the same service for his companion. After that he jumped out of the window to the ground himself.

"There is not a mark against the sill of the window where the rope has strained across it, and more than that, there is no mark on the rope itself to indicate that it was used in that manner."

"Then how——"

"Let me begin at the beginning and tell you just what has happened, madame."

"I wish you would do so, sir."

"In the first place, this Jane Golden is and has been a confederate of the man and woman who have stolen Imogene away. I have no doubt that she came to your service with that very purpose in view.

"I suppose you recall what Isabel Power told us?"

"Yes."

"She said that not long ago a strange woman who was very beautiful and very attractive in many ways, spoke to Imogene at the gate. I have reason to believe that I know the identity of that woman and that it was she who planned and carried out the abduction of my ward.

"Without doubt that was her first appearance in the neighborhood. Also, it is likely that her interview with Imogene was an accident, and was not a part of her plans. I think that she came to the school merely to warn Jane Golden that the time and the hour were ripe for the perfection of their plans.

"I know that one of the servants was seen to speak

to a stranger at about that time, at the gate near which the abductors later entered the grounds.

"There was a man and a woman together in the work of the abduction. The man is tall and lithe and quick, and as strong as a giant; the woman is young and beautiful. Both of them ultimately entered this room. The man left a flake or two of cigar ashes to tell of his presence; the woman left behind her—a shred of lace from the trimming of her lingerie. She lost it while the man was lowering her from the window with the rope.

"But to return, one or both of them saw Jane Golden and made the appointment with her to be at the small gate, at the corner of the garden wall at a certain time, and, by the way, you have stated that the key to that gate is in your possession; but in that you are mistaken. I have it in mine."

"How is that?"

"Why, it was probably stolen from you by the woman, Golden. She did not know—she had not the wit to discover—that the gate had been riveted fast so that it could not be opened with the key.

"Having stolen the key from you, she went to the small gate at the appointed time, only to find that the mere shooting of the bolt in the lock did not suffice.

"I haven't any doubt that she was cursed roundly for her stupidity. I know that she threw the key from her, in the grass, where I found it. Probably she already knew of that double step-ladder used by your gardener. It is certain that she procured it and dragged it to the gate, where her confederates were awaiting her.

"If you will look at the lock of the gate you will find that a key has lately been used upon it, and that the bolt is at present shot back. There are fresh scratches upon the lock and also on the key.

"Having fetched the ladder for them, they—the man and the woman—crossed the wall into the grounds. The ladder was then taken down and laid on the ground along the fence until they should require to use it for their return.

"After that, they all approached the house together."

"But how did they enter the house? There was no rope dangling from the window at that time, was there?"

"No, but let me tell you that all three of those persons are experienced housebreakers. While the man waited outside under the window, Jane Golden led the woman into the house by the way she had left it. They went together to Imogene's room.

"It was a very simple thing for those two women to do—two who are thoroughly accustomed to robbing dwelling-houses in the night, and people while they sleep. They had no fear of disturbing any of the sleepers in the house—with the possible exception of one."

"And who——"

"Never mind that at present. Upon gaining the room, the leader of the party—the beautiful woman—chloroformed Imogene. You understand, do you not, that I am not surmising at all, that I am relating what I know to be a succession of facts?"

"Yes, only I have no idea how you know it all so well."

"Possibly I may explain all that. Now, having chloroformed my ward, one end of the rope that the woman had brought into the house with her was thrown out of the window, while at the same time she took two or three turns with the other end of it, around one of the legs of the bed—but strangely enough, when the rope was tied to one of the legs later on, the man selected a different one. Don't you know how I know that?"

"No."

"If you will look at this one here, you will see where the rope has chafed it. You can see where the rope was wound around it, and you can imagine her standing and holding it while the man climbed up it and entered at the window."

"But why should they go to all that trouble when they could easily have walked out by the door through which the woman entered, accompanied by Golden?"

"My dear madame, the abductors had plotted from the beginning to make it appear that Imogene had eloped, or had run away. It was no part of their plans that it should appear that she had been taken away by force. I think that they will even go so far as to compel her to write a letter to you to that effect, or at least they will forge one which you will think might have come from her.

"Now, when the man entered at the window, the woman who had held the rope coolly gave him the end that she had held, and told him to make it fast somewhere. She had already let it slip away from the place where she had taken a couple of turns around a leg of the bed so that her puny strength could sustain his weight. When she gave it into his hands, she told him to make it fast somewhere, and without noticing—or perhaps not knowing, or caring—where she had used it, he tied it to the place where we found it—and he tied a bowline.

"There has been no strain whatever put upon that knot. There has been no strain of weight against that leg of the bed where it is now tied. Below, on the ground, are the marks of the man's feet where he leaped from the window after he had lowered the woman out of the window and then passed the senseless Imogene down to her in the same manner."

"And Golden?"

"No, she went out the way she came in—by one of the doors."

"But why should they not all have made their exits in the same manner?"

"Because they did not choose to do so; because there was less danger in not doing so; because they are ac-

customed to entering and departing from houses by surreptitious means. Those are reasons enough.

"While they were in the room the woman selected and packed the few things of Imogene's that she thought it wise to take away with her. Golden, all this time, probably stood watch at the door, so that in case you were disturbed she could easily have made some explanation to you.

"When their work was done they left the house as I have described. They returned to the place where they had left the ladder. They went over the wall as I have described their method of entering the grounds. After they had gone Jane Golden returned the ladder to its place in the greenhouse—and again she dragged it across the lawn. She left traces that were plain enough for a blind man to follow.

"Now, madame, that is the whole story of the abduction—and I haven't a doubt that I know perfectly well who that man and woman were."

"Then why——"

"The only trouble is that I do not know where in the world to search for them, and I have no idea just what their game may be—but all that I will presently find out."

"But if you know who they are, you will surely know where to search for them."

"Possibly. Yet I am by no means certain. However, there is one person in this house at the present moment who, I think, can tell me that."

"You refer to Jane Golden?"

"No, I refer to Mademoiselle Duprez."

"Ah! You think that she is another confederate?"

"I am sure of it, although I think that she was merely a passive one. She sleeps too lightly; she says that she was awake most of the night; she is positive that she would have heard a noise had there been one—and all that. I think I know a way to make her talk."

"It would seem, sir, as if I were surrounded by a set of conspirators."

"Hardly that. However, if you will go now and send the mademoiselle to me, here in this room, and leave her alone with me, I will put her through a little experience that is known to the police as the 'third degree.'"

"Yes, sir. I will do that at once."

"And in the meantime, madame, it would be as well if you would content yourself to remain in the room where we left Jane Golden. I do not think that she can escape, but it will be as well to remain on the safe side. She is an English crook, Paris taught, and those people have a thousand tricks ready at hand; so, watch out for her while I see what can be done with Mademoiselle Duprez."

CHAPTER V.

THE ESCAPE OF A PRISONER.

Nick Carter stood in the middle of the room looking idly about him while he waited for the coming of Mademoiselle Duprez, but he was suddenly aroused out of his meditations by the rush of feet along the hallway, and Madame Duclos burst into the room again.

"She is not there! She has gone!" exclaimed the madame breathlessly.

"Who is not there? Who has gone?" asked Nick coolly.

"Jane Golden."

"Precisely. Did she take the handcuffs with her? Or did she leave them behind her?" the detective asked the questions calmly, and he was smiling all the while.

"You seem not to care a jot about her escape," cried the madame impatiently.

"On the contrary, madame, I am really very much pleased. It has all happened exactly as I wished."

"As you wished! Do you mean that you *wanted* her to escape?"

"Yes, something very much like that. I will explain presently. But you have not replied to my question, madame."

"What was it?"

"Did she take the handcuffs with her, or——"

"Oh! no. She left them behind. They are on the floor near the chair in which she was seated."

"Indeed! Did you happen to notice whether they had been unlocked? Or had they been, perhaps, slipped from her wrists?"

"They are wide open, if that is what you mean."

"That is precisely what I mean. Thank you."

"Are you going to make no effort to find her?"

"Certainly—after a little. At present I am more anxious to see Mademoiselle Duprez."

"I had utterly forgotten her, Mr. Carter."

"Had you? I had not. Will you send her to me now?"

"And Jane Golden—what of her?"

"Jane believes that she is making good her escape, so let her go. At present, send the mademoiselle to me, if you please."

Five minutes later, mademoiselle entered the room, and Nick stepped forward as she did so, and closed the door behind her and locked it.

She viewed his act with some surprise, and there was distinct fear depicted in her face, also, but she asked very calmly:

"Why do you lock the door, sir?"

"In order to be assured that we may not be disturbed while we are talking, mademoiselle," replied the detective. "We have a great deal to say to each other. You have much to tell me and it is quite as well that we should be assured that we are alone."

"I—have much—to tell you? I do not understand."

"Mademoiselle," said the detective deliberately, "I will spare you all the unnecessary pain that is possible; but it is just as well that you should understand from the beginning that I am not to be trifled with. I do not for a moment believe that you were an active agent in the abduction of Imogene—but I *know* that you were a passive one."

"Monsieur!"

"Spare me your expressions of astonishment and indignation, if you please."

"I will not remain in your presence, sir, to be insulted in this way."

"On the contrary, you will remain here until I choose to set you at liberty. You have only a few moments ago unlocked the handcuffs that held Jane Golden a prisoner. You have set her free——"

"It is not true, sir."

"Pardon me, it is quite true. Shall I tell you how you did it?"

She made no reply, and he continued:

"When I snapped the last pair of handcuffs upon Jane Golden, by which she was fastened to the chair, I purposely made a change in them, so that I was obliged to use my key. Then, with just as much intent, I managed to let the key slip from my fingers to the floor so that it fell upon the bear rug, where it would make no sound. I took good care that Jane Golden should see the key when it fell and that she should believe that I was unaware of the fact of its loss. I also saw to it that the heavy chair in which she was a prisoner was in such a position that she could not, unaided, move it across the room to the place where I had dropped the key."

Mademoiselle was regarding him with wide-open and staring eyes, but she made no comment.

"You, better than anybody else, now, can understand why I did all that. Shall I proceed?"

Silence was his reply, and he did proceed.

"When you, mademoiselle, entered the room where Jane was a prisoner, while your employer and I were engaged in this room, Jane lost no time in indicating to you where the key was. You procured it, you unlocked the handcuffs, and you set her free. Do you dare to deny it?"

The detective stepped nearer to her as he asked the question, and bent threateningly toward her.

"Do you dare to deny it?" he repeated, and she murmured in reply:

"No, it is true, quite true."

The detective returned to his former position. He was smiling.

"Mademoiselle," he said, speaking gently and persuasively, "you told me the truth when you stated that you slept ill last night. I know you did—and I know why."

The young woman was trembling now, and she regarded the detective with terror in her eyes.

"You seem to know everything," she murmured.

"No, I do not know everything. If I did, it would not be necessary to have you here, and question you as I am about to do. But I do know much, and you are about to tell me a few things that I do not know, but which it is necessary that I should know."

She made no reply, and he continued:

"You slept badly because you knew of the conspiracy that was on foot for the night. Jane Golden had told you that the woman who is known to all Paris as Dema the Dangerous had arrived on the scene. She had told you that the man whom you know as Chester, but whose real name is Mayne, was with Dema. She had told you that Imogene Clancy was to be abducted from her room last night, and that you were to remain quiescent while it was going on. The information drove all idea of sleep from your mind, and you listened, and listened for the sound of their coming, for the work of the abduction, and——"

"Are you a devil, monsieur?"

"Mademoiselle Duprez," said Nick, paying no attention to her question, but taking a step nearer to her, "I do not think that you willingly aided in this affair. I do not think that you approved of it or abetted it in your secret heart, but I do think that you were compelled, by reason of some power which those people hold over you, to lend your passive aid to their undertaking. I advise you to be frank with me."

"They will kill me. They will murder me. They will give me up to the law. They will——"

"If you are frank with me, it may not be long before they will pay the penalty for several of their crimes which are far worse than this one."

"But that will not prevent them from betraying me. I have, myself, committed a crime. I did not mean to do it. I killed him in self-protection, but that does not appear. It happened in Paris, three years ago, and——"

"You need tell me nothing about it at all. I do not care to know. But I will tell you this about yourself, mademoiselle. You have not the face, the heart, the conscience, or the courage of a criminal, and you are not one."

"I have been their tool ever since that terrible time," murmured the poor woman. "There was a short while when they were imprisoned over here, and it was thought that they would be executed for their crimes, but by some means they were taken back to Paris, and—as I knew would be the case—it was not long after that when they were both at liberty again. I do not know how."

"So the abductors *were* Dema and Captain Chester, were they?" murmured Nick, smiling. "You ob-

serve, mademoiselle, that I did not even know that much. I only guessed it, but it was a guess based upon a collection of facts which could not be far wrong. Now tell me—did they send you here, to this school?"

"No, I fled from them. My coming here was purely a coincidence. Had I gone elsewhere, I might have escaped them entirely, but when I came here I found Jane Golden already here. She belongs to them, body and soul—if she has one."

"I begin to understand. And she reported your presence here, did she?"

"Yes."

"So after that you were obliged to live in passive obedience to them?"

"I was."

"Why did you liberate Jane Golden? Why did you not leave here where she was?"

"I had no intention of liberating her when I entered the room. I went to speak to her, to implore her not to betray me. I have always lived in terror of that thing I did, which they said was murder, and——"

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't concern us just at present. Get back to Jane."

"She promised to protect me if I would set her free. She had seen you drop the key. She told me it was on the bearskin rug. I found it. I unlocked the handcuffs and she ran from the room by one door while I went out through another."

"Exactly."

"But you meant that she should escape, did you not? Else you would not have dropped the key."

"Yes, I meant that she should escape. I also meant that you should have the opportunity to set her at liberty. I shall not lose her, do not fear that. She is even now carefully watched, and she will not make a motion that will not be reported to me."

"What do you wish me to tell you, monsieur? I am willing to tell you everything that I know about those people."

"I believed that you would be. You have already assured me that I am correct in my surmise regarding the identity of the abductors."

"Yes."

"I want you to tell me now all that you know about the plot that is involved in the case. Why, from their side of the case, was Imogene abducted? How will they treat her? Where has she been taken?"

"I do not know very much about it. I will tell you all I do know."

"Thank you. Do so at once, if you please."

"Imogene is an heiress. In a few months she will inherit in her own right an immense fortune. It will be when she comes of age, at eighteen."

"Yes."

"The French law gives a husband entire control over the property of his wife. They intend to marry Imogene to some man—I do not know who—and by that means ultimately to secure control of her fortune. I think they will treat her well, save that she may be forced to marry the man of their choice, whether she be willing or not, and I know that they intended to sail for France this morning. I believe that they have already left the country."

"What more do you know about the case, mademoiselle?"

"Nothing more, sir. I know nothing more than I have told you, save that Jane Golden will follow them, as soon as it is possible for her to do so."

"Yes, there is one more thing that you know, and which I wish you to tell me."

"What is that, sir?"

"I wish you to tell me at what address in Paris Dema the Dangerous will make her headquarters when she arrives there," said the detective quietly.

Mademoiselle Duprez started to her feet in excitement.

"I had forgotten! I had forgotten that," she said. "Ah! It is well that you reminded me of it. I am glad, overjoyed that you suggested it to me, for otherwise you would never have found her in the world. But now I can tell you. Now, through you, I shall have my revenge for all that I have been made to suffer. Now, even though that terrible woman believes that she is entirely safe, you will hunt her down in her fancied security, and you will bring her to her just deserts. Yes, I will tell you, and you will thank Heaven that you found me here. And afterward, when, through me, you have found this woman and have saved Imogene, perhaps you will be my friend."

CHAPTER VI.

A VERY OLD MYSTERY.

"Your manner is rather puzzling," said the detective. "Explain yourself, please."

"Listen, sir," replied mademoiselle. "In Paris, for many years, there has resided an old woman whose age may be anywhere from fifty to eighty years. She is Spanish—or was, for it is evident to me at least, that the present Duchess del Puente is an impostor.

"This duchess rarely leaves her house, save to drive on the boulevards or along the Champs Elysee. She resides in a little cul-de-sac street, known as the Rue de Porthos. It was named, I believe, for one of the heroes of a Dumas novel."

"I know the place," said Nick. "Go on."

"The residence is the one formerly occupied by the Count de Grammont—you will know that, also?"

"Yes."

"At that place the duchess entertains her friends. It is generally supposed that she is poor, that she has barely

sufficient means to meet her expenses, but nevertheless she succeeds in drawing around her a set of men who wield great influence in Parisian affairs. They have full liberty there, and it is rumored that the duchess permits them to gamble to their hearts' content, receiving therefor certain payments which enable her to support herself as she does."

"Well?"

"She has a niece who lives with her who is very beautiful, and this niece is supposed to have come from Spain four years ago to take up her residence with her aunt, the duchess."

"I suppose you are about to say that the niece and Dema the Dangerous are one and the same."

"No, it is the duchess who, I think, is Madame Dema. It was through my acquaintance with the duchess that I fell into the toils of this woman. I am well born, sir. I belong to a good family, but I am now supposed to be dead. A body supposed to be mine was identified at the morgue and buried for me.

"I had known the duchess since I was a child. My people knew her. She used to call at our residence, we used to go there. It began, this acquaintance, long ago, when I was a child. I conceived—I do not know why—a fondness for the old duchess, and when, ultimately, I was forbidden to go there again, I used to call upon her secretly.

"I fancied then that I discovered a difference. I know now I was right in my fears. The house was not the same, the duchess was not the same. Gradually I fell into her toils. I met men there. One of them made love to me. The duchess had purposely arranged so that we would be alone in her salon together. The man—— Ah! I cannot tell you about it. It is sufficient to say that at the end of the few moments that we were together I seized a weapon—a dagger that hung against the wall as an ornament—and struck him with it. He fell to the floor, and I fainted away. When I recovered, the duchess was bending over me.

"In my excitement, I supposed it was the man who had attacked me, and I struck out wildly, and in doing so I seized upon the woman's hair. It came loose in my grasp, and—saw before me a beautiful young woman who was an utter stranger to me at that time. That woman was Dema the Dangerous as I have since discovered.

"There, sir, you have the story. The duchess bound me to secrecy regarding her disguise. She insisted that the old duchess was still alive, but had returned to Spain, leaving her, a relative, in her place to carry out certain things which she wished accomplished, and which she was too old to perform herself.

"But I know this, sir. I know that the Duchess del Puente was sometimes, if not all the time, Dema the Dangerous, in disguise. I know that she hides away from the law in that character. I believe that Imogene will be taken to that house, and will ultimately fall into their toils.

"You see, sir, that whatever the crimes of Dema are, she cannot be traced to the duchess. She is secure, in that character. She lives the life of a grandee—of a chatelaine. She attracts around her a set of men who are influential. She is her own protection, her own body-guard, her own sure reliance, and she controls the worst association of cutthroats and thieves in all Paris. And it is to that house, under that influence, that Imogene will be taken. I think it is not difficult to understand the plot now."

"No," said Nick. "It is not difficult now. I can see it all. Dema has selected this well-known character of the old woman for her shield. She has possibly murdered her and assumed her place and position—and she has created the character of the niece you mentioned, in order that she may keep this supposed old woman in seclusion whenever there happens to be company at her house who might penetrate the disguise."

"That is it exactly."

"And you have possessed this dangerous secret—how long?"

"Three years."

"It is a wonder that you were not murdered long ago."

"Ah! I was useful, and I myself stood in terror of arrest. The man I struck with the dagger, I killed."

"You do not know that."

"I was assured that it was so."

"I regard it as extremely doubtful. Probably you wounded him—no more. However, we will drop that now. I will ask the madame to permit you to remain here, and——"

"I thank you, sir. It is very kind."

"Later, it is possible that I may be of service to you. If you care to tell me who you really are, it is possible that I can succeed in restoring you to your friends."

"I prefer not, sir. Let me remain as I am—dead to them," was the sad reply.

* * * * * * * *

It was late in the evening when the detective again entered his own house, and during the time that had elapsed he had sought in vain for a trace of the means by which Dema the Dangerous could have left the country with the girl she had abducted and with the man who had aided her. The only clue that he had succeeded in obtaining was that a French tramp steamer known to be very fast had cleared for Havre, in ballast, the preceding day, and he supposed that the conspirators might have made arrangements to go in her, since he was certain that they had not departed by any of the usual routes.

But he was entirely convinced of one thing, and that was that his quickest and surest means of finding Imogene was to go to Paris, and to the house in the Rue

de Porthos, off the Champs Elysee, at once, and this he determined to do.

Chick's report was exactly as he already expected it to be. The French authorities had made the demand for the two criminals an international matter, and they had been sent to Paris to be tried for other crimes, on their promise to betray all their accomplices. Of what had occurred to them after their return to that country, nothing could be learned.

Patsy, who had remained outside of the school of Madame Duclos, waiting to be called, and who had been signaled by Nick to follow Jane Golden when she should escape, had, much to his disgust, lost track of her almost as soon as she arrived in New York, but Nick consoled him with the assurance that it made no difference at all to his plans, for he knew now perfectly well how to proceed with the case.

The very next morning, Nick Carter sailed for France by one of the steamers of the French line.

And he went alone.

He thought it best to leave his assistants at home—and so it was that, eight days after his experience at the school from which Imogene had disappeared, he found himself walking the streets of Paris—and he discovered, also, that the steamer on which he supposed Dema to have sailed had arrived at Havre only a few hours before he did.

His first act, after he had established himself at a hotel, was to call upon the chief of the secret service of the Paris police, and although it was rather late in the evening, he found that gentleman, who was well known to him, in his office.

"Ah! Monsieur Cartair!" exclaimed his friend. "I am truly glad to see you again. It is business that brings you here? No?"

"Yes," replied the detective, and he plunged at once into the subject that interested him. "I am in search of a little information that you might term social."

"Social? Ah! I do not understand."

"Tell me what your department knows about a certain old Spanish duchess—Duchess del Puente."

The chief threw up his hands in surprise.

"Ah!" he said. "That woman. Cartair, she is a mystery—and old—a very old mystery!" and he laughed at his own joke.

"Not so old, possibly, as it would appear," said Nick dryly. "Tell me about her."

"What is it that you wish to know?"

"Everything that you know on the subject."

"It is very little."

"So I suppose, but give me the benefit of that little."

"With pleasure. Pierre"—to his secretary—"bring me the file, number—let me see—ah, yes, the file numbered, 'Foreign—Letter S—District C. E.—769.' That is it. Here we have it, Monsieur Cartair. Will you read it for yourself?"

"No, tell me about it, please. Just the salient points."

"Ah, yes. Here it is. 'La Duchesse del Puente. Born in Seville, 1830.' Ah! Did I not say that it was an old mystery? But to proceed."

"If you please, monsieur."

"'Requested by her king to reside outside of Spain for the rest of her life, 1887. Paris, October, 1887. Resides 39 Rue de Porthos, in the Champs Elysee district. You know the place, do you not?"

"Perfectly."

"Very good. 'Supposed to be interested in politics. Entertains lavishly.' Um-um! There seems to be nothing more of interest here, until very lately. In fact"—closing the book and returning it to the secretary—"I can tell you better all that you wish to know, without stopping to read it."

"So I supposed."

"The woman is a mystery. She is an intriguer. She entertains discredited politicians from every country. She also entertains many who are influential in France. I have been warned, several times, that it will be better for me to leave the duchess alone unless there is some very apparent reason for molesting her."

"That is also as I supposed."

"You seem to be remarkably well informed. Perhaps you know more than I do about it."

"I want to know your own private opinion about her."

"Ah! That is different."

"I thought so."

"The duchesse," said the chief, with a great air of confidence, "is a secret agent of Russia. Before the war with Japan, she was very active, but since that time Russia has not had so much for her to do, and she has taken to other things."

"What, for instance?"

"Ah! Who can say? Some persons are known to have gone to her house, who should not go to any respectable place. Thieves, murderers, bad lots, but—what would you? I have been warned to keep my hands off? The crooks whom I know to have gone to her house are at the present time beyond the pale of the law, and——"

"Is she in the city now?"

"Yes."

"Has she been absent from the city at all?"

"I do not think so."

"Don't you know whether she has or not?"

"I am positive that she has not been absent from the city an hour since she came here in October, 1887," was the emphatic reply.

"And I," replied the detective, "am equally positive that she arrived in France by steamship from the United States this very morning. What do you think of that?"

"Think? My dear Cartair, I only think—— No! I *know* that you are mistaken."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCENT OF THE TRAIL.

"Do you mind if I change the subject rather abruptly?" asked the detective, after a moment of silence between them.

"Not at all. Not at all."

"I want a little information about a young and very beautiful woman who is known to your police by the somewhat euphonious title of Dema the Dangerous."

"Ah! Sacré! That is different."

"Quite so."

"She should have been called Dema the Devil."

"Without doubt."

"Why do you ask about her?"

"Because I wish to know."

"What has she to do with your inquiries regarding the duchess?"

"At the present state of the inquiry—nothing."

The chief of the secret service was silent for a moment, and then he exclaimed:

"Ah! I know now. It was you who arrested her, in America, for the murder of somebody over there, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And we, of France—of Paris—stole her away from you. Deprived you of the fruits of your labors, eh?"

"Precisely."

"Well, monsieur, I most heartily wish that we had let you keep her."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Is it that you have learned of her disappearance?"

"I know that she is no longer in your custody, if that is what you mean."

"Yes, that is what I mean. And now, you wish to know about her, eh?"

"That is how I have asked you to favor me."

"It is with great regret, Cartair, that I am compelled to inform you that I know nothing whatever about her since the time of her disappearance."

"You have used that word twice, now. It sounds as if it had some especial significance in this case. Has it so?"

"Decidedly."

"Will you tell me about that disappearance?"

"Certainly—all that I know about it. It is told in two words: She disappeared."

"From where?"

"From the cab in which she was being conveyed from the railroad-station to the prison, after her arrival in Paris."

"How was it done?"

"Ah, there is the mystery. Listen. There was the cab. There were two of my best and most reliable men, one was on the box with the driver, the other was inside the vehicle with the woman and the man who was her companion."

"Captain Chester Mayne?"

"The same. Known here as Chester, only."

"Yes. I know. Well?"

"There was the cab, there were the two men, there were the two prisoners, both securely shackled, there——"

"Were they handcuffed together?"

"No. There was the wide avenue leading to the Gare du Nord. There, also, was some sort of an impromptu riot in the street. There, in the midst of it, a fiend leaped upon the box of the cab and struck my policeman who sat there with the driver; there, at the same time, appeared at one of the doors of the cab another fiend, who shoved the muzzle of a revolver into the cab and cautioned my other policeman that he must not utter a sound on pain of instant death, and at the same instant the door on the opposite side opened, and the two prisoners stepped outside, shackled as they were."

Nick was laughing quietly. It all seemed so simply done, but the chief of the secret service appeared not to notice the detective's amusement.

"On the top of the cab," continued the chief, "my policeman was fighting fiercely with the man who had attacked him, and at which the driver was assisting. Understand me, he was assisting the fiend who did the attacking—not my policeman. At the door of the cab, the other man remained with his revolver carefully aimed at the heart of my other policeman. The row eventually attracted notice. Other officers ran to the assistance of those with the cab."

The chief ceased suddenly, and after waiting a moment, Nick asked:

"Well, what more?"

"Sacré! There is nothing more."

"No?"

"When the excitement was over, it was discovered that the prisoners had evaporated. Is not that what you call a disappearance into the air? Eh?"

"Quite so."

"From that moment there has been no trace of them; none whatever."

"And that is what you call the disappearance, is it?"

"Yes. It impresses me as being a very good word for the occasion, too."

"Of course you have searched for them? Especially for Dema?"

"Searched for them? Cartair, I have turned Paris wrong side out in my search for them. They are nowhere; it was a disappearance. I use the word advisedly."

"So it would seem."

"They did not leave the city. I had every means of

exit covered in less that thirty minutes. They did not remain in the city. I have had a house-to-house search almost. There is no nest where they could have hidden, which has not been searched. Santos Dumont was not in that vicinity at the time, so it is not logical to suppose that they went up in a balloon; there are no subterranean passages in that neighborhood, so it is not likely that the earth swallowed them. They disappeared. It is the word. It is the only word. It explains everything even though it tells us nothing."

Nick laughed aloud.

"You certainly make it very graphic," he said.

"You have come here to find her? That Dema?" asked the chief.

"Yes."

"Cartair, if you can find her you will win my eternal gratitude, to say nothing of the sum of five thousand francs which I have offered as a reward for information leading to her arrest."

"I will find her for you, sir. I think I know where she is at this moment."

"But, my dear friend, that is impossible. Quite."

"No; it is a fact."

"It is impossible. I, the chief of the secret service, with all the machinations of the underground system, so called, of Paris at my command, know nothing about her. How is it possible that you, who have arrived in France only a few hours ago, should know? It is impossible, I tell you. Quite so."

The smile on the face of the detective did not fade; he only repeated:

"I will find her for you, and I will bring her here to you—or I will take you to her and permit you to make the arrest in person. How would that suit you?"

"Since I have enjoyed the office of chief of the secret service, Cartair, I have done very little of what you call 'arresting in person,' but if such an opportunity as you suggest should arise I think now that I would consent to lay aside my official dignity for a time, and do the 'arresting in person'; after which I should do myself the honor to—what you call in your country—blow you to dinner. But it is impossible. The woman has disappeared. Tell me, Cartair, what has she been doing now, that you are after her again?"

"She has abducted a young lady from a school near New York."

"Impossible. It was not that Dema. I tell you she could not have left Paris."

"But she did leave Paris; and the man with her; and they have just returned."

"Ah! On the same ship with the duchess?"

"Precisely. You have guessed it the first time."

"My dear Cartair, although you do not show it, I fear that you are growing old in your profession. Ah! they are terrible—these hallucination that we sometimes get; no?"

"Chief," said Nick, with great earnestness, "if I will tell you a secret, will you agree to keep it and not to act upon it until such time as I shall say the word?"

"Yes, Cartair, I will agree to that."

"Then let me tell you that your Duchess del Puente and Dema the Dangerous, are one and the same. When Dema has occasion to go elsewhere for a time, there is another who masquerades as the duchess in her place. When Dema disappeared, she merely became the duchess. When she did not go up in a balloon, or take an underground trolley—she became the duchess before your eyes—or, rather, before the eyes of your men, for I will wager that the carriage of the duchess was somewhere in the immediate neighborhood at the time, and that Dema and her companion merely climbed in it when they evaporated into thin air."

"Ah, Cartair! you are a devil."

"I have been told that before."

"The carriage of the duchess *was* near at hand at the time, now that you remind me of it; but it was driven away immediately."

"Of course; and with the people you were seeking."

"It seems impossible. I curse myself—mildly, of course—that I have not thought of it before; and it is strange, too, that I should not have done so. Very strange."

"Quite so," agreed Dick laconically.

"But, Cartair, you are quite sure of your premises?"

"Positive."

"And what do you propose to do?"

"I wish you to find for me some person who is persona grata at the house of the duchess, and I wish to be taken there—as soon as possible—in disguise. I wish merely to be introduced and made welcome. I will do the rest."

"It shall be done. Nothing is easier. I have two secret agents who are received there."

"Can you trust them?"

"Implicitly."

"Monsieur, I have an idea."

"You were ever prolific of that sort of thing? What may this one be?"

"How long is it since you have gone about the city in disguise, yourself?"

"Ah! It is a long time; a very long time. Not since I was a worker in the service; I have not done it since I have been chief."

"But you have not, I trust, lost any of your cunning at the art."

"I believe not. I am sure not."

"Then why not make the call with me."

The eyes of the chief twinkled with pleasure.

"Ah!" he said, "if only I could do so; but there are my

men. I would not care to have them know that I had foregone my dignity even for a moment."

"Why need they know?"

"Eh?"

"Why need they know anything about it? When you make the arrangements for my introduction, you have only to say that your secret agent is to present two strangers instead of one. That he is to call at my hotel for them—and then you have only to be there with me, and your own men need not have the least idea who you are."

"Cartair!" cried the chief, leaping to his feet with flashing eyes, "it is a great thought. It is worthy of you. It shall be done. We will arrange it for to-morrow evening. In the morning I will call in my physician, and he will report here that I am temporarily ill; that I will not attend at the office for one, two, or three days; and when evening comes you and I together will attend at the house of the duchess. Ah! it will be like the old days, with the scent of the trail strong in my nostrils. Cartair, it shall be done!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RECEPTION AT THE HOUSE OF THE DUCHESS.

Imagine a long salon, seventy feet in depth, thirty feet in width. Imagine this apartment glaring with a hundred lights, fragrant with the perfume of flowers, where the perfume was strong enough to overcome the odor which stole in through the heavy curtains from the smoking-room; and this latter, by the way, was called a smoking-room only by courtesy, for the guests at the house of the Duchess del Puente smoked wherever they pleased—and they usually pleased to do so anywhere but in the smoking-room.

Imagine this room as heavy with decorations, as crowded with furniture—and as filled with half a throng of people.

The duchess never made the mistake of having too many people at her receptions; but there were always many.

The duchess herself sat in state on that evening when Nick Carter and his frend the chief of the secret service were to be presented.

She was at one end of the great room, seated in a huge easy chair, which was so arranged that not one of her guests could approach too closely; and she was flanked on one side by a tall footman, who stood ever ready to do her bidding, while on the other was an individual who might with good reason be called her trumpeter, since it was his duty to repeat to the duchess—through an ear-trumpet—everything that was said to her.

He really played the part of an interpreter, although nothing but the French and the Spanish languages were spoken there.

There was, for the moment, however, very little for him to interpret, since all her guests were engaged in following their own devices. Two or three tables were occupied by card-players, and others of the party were engaged in earnest conversation anywhere but in the vicinity of the duchess. Since she had grown so very deaf conversation with her had dragged.

But there came a diversion presently.

The curtains at the main entrance to the room were parted, and an announcement was made in a stentorian voice which penetrated to the farthest corners of the room.

Even the attention of the duchess was attracted, for she said to her trumpeter:

"Who is it? Who comes?"

"Messieurs Dalney, Carson, and Pierot," the man repeated after the announcement.

The duchess gazed toward the curtains at the doorway, and then she murmured:

"Dalney is known to me; but who are the others? They are strangers."

Evidently the man at her side did not regard it as necessary to reply; at all events he made no attempt to do so; and then the three came forward, and he who was announced as Dalney bowed before the duchess, and said:

"Madame la duchesse, I have the honor to present my two good friends, Messieurs Carson—who is an Englishman—and Pierot, who is a Frenchman who has long resided in England."

The two strangers paid their respects—but they performed that service as briefly as possible, because of the ear-trumpet—and then drew aside, where they were duly presented to others of the company; and a moment later Nick Carter—who was there in the person of Carson—noticed that the duchess left her chair and was conducted by the footman from the room.

She leaned heavily upon his arm as she went out, and she walked lame, as if the weight of years was rapidly becoming more than she could bear; and Nick, who perceived that he and the chief were for the moment out of hearing by the others, nudged his companion, and said:

"The duchess is retiring. Tell me—is the young woman who is called her niece at present in the room?"

"I do not see her," said the chief, in reply.

"Then I think that the duchess will presently reappear in the person of the niece, and that we will have to be presented all over again. Ah, Dalney, can you tell me which of the ladies present is the beautiful niece of the duchess? I have heard so much about her."

Dalney looked around the room carefully; and then he replied:

"I do not think she is here. I don't see her."

Ten minutes later, however, he crossed the room to where Nick was standing, and whispered:

"The niece has just entered the room, monsieur."

"Indeed. Where is she?"

"There—near the door."

"Yes; I see her. She is very beautiful."

"She is ravishing."

"She is, indeed. What is her name?"

"Mercedes de Echeveria."

"The name is as beautiful as the face. Will you present me at the first opportunity?"

"Yes; I will go now and ask her permission."

While he was absent, the chief whispered in the detective's ear:

"Is there a likeness, do you think? I will confess that I can see none."

"Very little. There is just enough to be puzzling—but that is all."

"Then do you not think that you are mistaken? Do you not think it is impossible that the beautiful woman we see near the door is Dema the Dangerous?"

"No. I am sure they are the same."

"Ah! I cannot see it. I cannot see it."

"Nor I at the present moment. She is evidently a master hand at disguising herself. But you must remember, chief, that we are not the only people in the world who may become adept at the art. You are not recognized, even by your own secret agent who introduced us; you must give others credit for being as skilful as you are."

"Say, rather, as you are, for if you had not assisted me——"

"Tut, tut! Forget it. Here comes Dalney. We will be presented now, and I would be willing to bet a hundred right now that that beautiful woman there is the same who left the room not a quarter of an hour ago, leaning upon the arm of the footman. Are you ready, chief?"

"Quite ready."

"Remember that she has sharp eyes, and that she is as shrewd as she is beautiful."

"I will remember."

In another moment the presentation was made, and at once the señorita entered into an animated conversation with the two supposed strangers.

"You are Spanish," said Nick Carter presently, when he had an opportunity to do so. "Let us converse in that language."

"Ah, señor, you speak Spanish?"

"As well, or better than I do the French."

"And you are English?"

"No; I am an American. It was a mistake when it was announced that I was English. But you were not in the room at the time. I would have known it if you had been. I should have discovered you instantly."

"Indeed! How?"

"Can you ask? Is it not easy to discover the glory of the moon even among a million stars?"

"My aunt told me that you were English," she said demurely, ignoring the direct compliment.

"Ah, yes. She has left the room, I see."

"She was fatigued. She went for a moment of rest. She will return presently."

Nick allowed his eyes to dwell lingeringly upon the great beauty of the woman beside him, and she, perceiving his regard, turned her eyes away in order that he might study her the better.

It was the gesture of a practised coquette, and the detective smiled a little as he continued the somewhat pointed observation of her beauty.

He remarked it as strange that although there were many points of similarity between this exquisitely beautiful person and the woman he believed her to be, yet the alterations of appearance that had been made were done so deftly that it was impossible to place the finger of discovery upon a single one.

Rich, voluptuous Spanish beauty of the most perfect type was what she represented now; and in her own person he knew Dema Chrisholm to be not of that type, although exceedingly beautiful.

He found himself analyzing the differences in the appearance of the two, as he could detect them.

He was on the point of making mental comments on the result of his study when she turned to him suddenly and interrupted his train of thought.

"Have you quite finished with your inspection of me?" she asked; and he pretended to be dismayed, although he replied at once:

"I hope, señorita, that I may never have finished with it. I should like to study your beauty for the remainder of my life. If I could see it before me forev——"

"That will suffice, sir. I must ask you to change the subject."

"I will try; but if I revert to it again you will be merciful in your judgment upon me, will you not?"

For a full minute she regarded him with a strange expression in her eyes, and then she made reply slowly, and it seemed to the detective, pointedly:

"You will find me, sir, as merciful in my judgment of you as you will be of me."

Before he could make another remark she had turned away and was earnestly conversing with another gentleman who had approached them.

But from time to time after that, although the detective wandered from place to place about the room, pausing here and there to enter into conversation with some of the guests, whenever he turned his eyes toward the woman who called herself Mercedes de Echeveria he found that she was looking at him—or if she were

not it always seemed to him as if she had just at that instant withdrawn her eyes from his face.

"What is there about me that attracts her?" he asked himself. "Can it be possible that she suspects who I am? Or that she even suspects that I am *not* what I appear to be?"

He could not give himself a satisfactory answer to the question, and so he watched for an opportunity to draw his friend the chief to one side, and then he said to him:

"Chief, you are a thousand times more familiar with the personnel of this company; tell me about some of the people who are here."

"Well, who, for example?" asked the chief.

"That tall man yonder; who is he?"

"The one who is just bending over the beautiful young countess, whom you believe——"

"Yes; that one."

"He is a banker, my dear Cartair. He is associated with the Rothchilds and has their confidence, I am told. I fear, though, that they might be tempted to withhold it if they were aware of the fact that he is a frequent guest at this place. His position gives him considerable influence among the politicians of Paris, and I suppose that is the reason why he is cultivated."

"You have met this supposed niece—the countess—before, chief?"

"No; this is the first presentation. I have heard about her, of course, and I have received reports about her, also."

"Surely. I had forgotten that custom of yours. Can you recall anything of that report, will you tell it to me?"

The chief meditated a moment; and then he replied:

"I think in substance it says everything that is good of her and nothing that is bad. It tells that she hails from Spain—like her aunt, the duchess; that she is now an orphan; that she is an heiress in her own right to a considerable fortune—and all that. I think that is about all."

"So, in reality, your department knows nothing about her."

"Nothing whatever."

"Then, chief, it remains for me to find out something about her, and to do that without delay. I shall do it this very night, too; for I intend when the others leave this house—yourself included—to remain behind. I believe that my ward, Imogene Clancy, is at this moment concealed somewhere within these four walls, and I intend before another day breaks upon us to know whether she is or not."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DETECTIVE'S DANGEROUS FOE.

It appeared to Nick soon after this as if the countess were purposely attempting to make an opportunity for another conversation with him, and he accepted the implied challenge, and as soon as he could do so approached her.

As he drew near she rose and said:

"Will you give me your arm, Monsieur Carson?"

He did so, and as they crossed the salon together he purposely led her in the direction of a small conservatory which opened off from the great reception-room; and there, in a far corner, he presently discovered a wide seat under a cluster of palms.

"Will you be seated?" he asked of her; and with a quick look into his eyes she dropped a little mocking curtsy as she replied:

"If you will sit beside me."

He could not help wondering if she were merely coqueting, or if she did in reality suspect his errand there, and was playing a game as deep as his own.

But he could not answer the question.

She baffled him at every point.

If he sought to become rather flippant in his flattery, she met him half-way and always with a brilliancy of wit that was quite equal to his own.

And all the while her eyes shone and sparkled upon him with an ever varying and always changing expression, and he was obliged to confess to himself that he could not fathom her.

It occurred to him that instead of assuming the initiative in their conversation, he would leave that for her to do; and she was not long in accepting the mute challenge.

"You have not been long in Paris?" she began, when they were seated side by side in their secluded corner, and were almost entirely shielded from observation.

"Since yesterday morning," he replied.

"And you came here from London, I suppose?"

"No," he replied, without thinking, "I came direct from New York."

He thought she started a little at that, and stole a quick glance at him; but she went on instantly, and without any perceptible pause in the conversation:

"And your friend Monsieur Pierot? Did he come with you?"

"No, indeed. He was here in Paris when I arrived."

"Mr. Dalney, however, tells me that Monsieur Pierot is a resident of—London. Do you know, I have been impressed with the idea that there is something familiar in his face and manner. It is as if I had met him before somewhere. And with you it is the same. Is not that rather odd, don't you think?"

"It is a great compliment—to have you think so, señorita, the countess."

"Ah, bah! Let us for the moment put aside all idle compliments and talk together like two rational human beings!" she exclaimed. And the detective replied:

"It is difficult to be rational in your presence, countess. It would be much easier to go mad—quite mad—and to do all sorts of irrational and hair-brained things."

"You are incorrigible."

"Say, rather, that I am——"

She interrupted him with a peal of laughter in the midst of which she rose suddenly to her feet and made as if to leave him; but he reached out a detaining hand and dared to seize her by the wrist and to hold her—although he perceived at once that she made no determined effort to escape.

And so they remained for a moment in tableau; and it was tableau which, strangely enough, neither of them knew to exist.

In fact, there were two other pairs of eyes than their own looking upon that scene, peering out upon them from the shelter of the palms; one pair on either side of them; one pair of eyes in the head of a woman who scowled fiercely upon the scene, and the other pair owned by a man whose face was almost livid, and who scowled fiercely upon them.

But both these strangers drew back out of sight the instant that the countess sprang to her feet, and the owners of each pair glided noiselessly away in opposite directions, so that it was doubtful if either knew of the presence of the other as witness to that scene.

And the countess, while she paused with Nick Carter's hand clinging to her wrist, looked down upon him and smiled, as she said slowly:

"I want you to release me, please. I want you to sit here and wait for me a moment. I will soon return. I promise."

Her eyes were smiling; her lips were rosy-red, and parted just enough so that the ivory whiteness of her matchless teeth showed between them; and she was bending just a little forward toward him.

Nick Carter had determined to play a part with this woman. He had determined to flirt desperately with her; to make love to her; almost literally to throw himself at her feet—and now in that instant he was forced to confess to himself that never had there been a part assigned to any one which was so easy to play.

She was magnificently, ravishingly beautiful; and Nick, still retaining his hold upon her wrist, drew the hand slowly toward him and pressed his lips against it.

She made no effort to withdraw it; and when, after kissing it again and again, he raised his eyes to hers once more, he saw that hers were smoldering like live coals; that the pulse of her throat was throbbing so that he could detect the motion of it, and that the intake of her breathing was quick and spasmodic.

The whole effect of her attitude startled him, and he dropped her hand quickly.

The act seemed to restore her to herself; to remind her of something that she had utterly forgotten for the moment—that they were in the conservatory where many eyes might see them, and that this man before her was a stranger; and in that instant Nick Carter had to confess that his own inner self was strangely and inexplicably moved.

Suddenly, with the lightness and quickness of a bird, she bent still nearer to him and touched his lips with the tips of her fingers; and whispering: "Wait; I will return!" she glided away out of sight through the blossoming plants, and was gone.

Nick Carter shook himself together—metaphorically, of course—after the manner of a Newfoundland dog, and then he found himself gazing abstractedly at the place where she had been standing, as if she were still there.

"What witchery is it that she surrounds herself with?" he asked himself; and for the moment he did not remember the axiom that one may not touch fire without being burned, and that one may not receive a charge of electricity without being shocked.

The detective had no idea of those two pairs of eyes that had looked down upon him from the obscurity of the palms; and that one pair belonged to the woman, Jane Golden, and the other to the man, Chester Mayne.

He could not know at that time that Jane Golden had crossed the ocean on the same ship with him, having bought off one of the stewardesses and assumed her place and occupation for the trip across; and still less was he aware of the fact that when the beautiful countess left him, with the promise to return after a moment, that she had gone for the specific purpose of consulting with Jane Golden.

For a remark made by the detective had startled her.

When she asked him if he had come from London, he had replied that he came from New York; and he had already said that he had arrived only the morning of the preceding day.

We are permitted, for the sake of consecutiveness in our story, to witness the conversation that took place between the countess and Jane Golden, for the purport of it became known to the detective afterward.

When the countess—we prefer to mention her by that title at present—left the detective and fled away through the blossoms of the conservatory, she entered the main building of the establishment by another door than that one which would have taken her to the salon where the guests were entertaining themselves; and as she entered through the door she actually collided with Jane, who had passed inside but the instant before.

"Jane," she whispered, in English, "come here with me a moment. I wish to talk with you;" and she led her quickly into a small room and closed the door.

"There is a man in the conservatory, with whom I was just talking," she began; but Jane held up her hand and stopped her.

"I saw him," she said coolly. "More, I heard and *saw* what you were doing."

"Well," said Dema, the countess, "who is he? He tells me that he came to France only yesterday—that he arrived from New York. If that is so, he must have come here on the same ship with you, and——"

"Did I not tell you at once—the moment that I saw you—that Nick Carter, the detective, came across on the same ship with me?" demanded Jane coldly. "And did you not laugh aloud at me, and cry out that Nick Carter were he then a thousand times Nick Carter could never in the world trace you to this house and to this place? Did I not tell you that, and did you not reply as I have said?"

"Yes," admitted the countess. "But this cannot be he—here already."

"Then, Dema, she devil that you are, let me tell you that it is he, and that he *is* here already."

"Is it possible? Is that man Nick Carter?"

"It is possible. It is true. That man is Nick Carter. I know it."

"How do you know it? Tell me that. He is disguised. I would have known him instantly if it were otherwise."

"Yes; he is disguised, all right. There is no doubt of that. He is as good at that sort of thing as you are yourself, countess—as you like to have yourself called—as good at that sort of thing as you are yourself."

Suddenly Jane leaned toward her mistress, and said coldly:

"Give me your right hand. Let me show you something. No; your right hand—the same one that you just now permitted Nick Carter to kiss so rapturously."

The countess laughed aloud; but it was a little, silvery laugh, the sound of which did not penetrate beyond the door; and she replied:

"Aye, he kissed it! And he shall kiss my lips before he is done—before he leaves this house to-night. He shall fall down upon his knees and worship me! He shall bend to my will! I will make him love me! I will make him declare his love! I will——"

"You will make an infernal fool of yourself!" interjected Jane grimly. "You came near to doing it just now. I was watching, and I saw."

"Well, and if I did so, what then?" asked the countess defiantly.

"What then? What then? Why, you will be yourself burned in the fire you kindle, that is all, my made-up beauty. You are a fine one to talk about making him love you, when already you are more than half prepared to throw yourself at his feet, to confess all, and to cast yourself and all your friends upon the mercy of that man. Do you suppose that I cannot see and know things when I see them with my own eyes? Do I not know you? Bah! you are a fool, Dema; and you are setting a fool's trap; and like a fool you will yourself be caught in it. I saw; I observed; I know. Chester Mayne saw you, too."

"Chester Mayne be——"

"Go on, my beauty. Say it; and I will tell him that you said it. What then?"

"That for Chester Mayne—and you also, Jane!" replied Dema, scowling and snapping her fingers. "I am queen here, and you—and he also—will obey me. Now, why did you wish to look at this hand?" and she extended the hand that Jane had asked to see.

"Because there is a scratch upon it—here—where you wounded yourself a little with the pin of your brooch."

"Well, what of it?"

"Only this: You asked me how I know that that man is Nick Carter in his disguise; and I reply by saying that one day on the way across a great wave struck the ship, and Nick Carter came near to being washed overboard. In saving himself, he caught at the rail near which he was standing, and in doing so he knocked the skin from the knuckle of the second joint of the middle finger of his right hand. In assuming his disguise he forgot all about that."

"Well, what has that accident to him to do with my own right hand?"

"Only this: If you wore a thousand disguises, and left the scratch on this hand exposed, I would know you at once—just as I knew him at once. Listen, Dema. I have just told you that Chester Mayne as well as I has seen and recognized this detective, and I am quite sure that you will find us agreed on one point, which is, that Nick Carter must not be permitted to leave this house alive."

CHAPTER X.

THE REAL DEMA THE DANGEROUS.

The smile which illumined the beautiful features of Mercedes, the Countess de Echeveria—otherwise Dema the Dangerous—in response to the last remark made by her companion, would have been difficult to define by any other person than Jane Golden; but it seemed to satisfy her, for she leaned forward a little and whispered:

"I see that you appreciate the necessity for action."

But Dema only continued to smile; and she remained silent for so long a time that at last Jane interrupted her meditations impatiently.

"Are you going to dream on all night?" she demanded angrily.

"I would like to dream such dreams as I am having now—always, Jane," came the rather unexpected reply,

in a soft and reminiscent tone. "And we will see. Perhaps it may be that I may."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ah! Do not ask me. I don't know; but I will tell you this much, Jane; I will not betray you, nor Chester Mayne, nor any other person—nor myself—for love, but if I can have love without betrayal, I will take it."

Jane sneered and her eyes grew cold.

"Just as you would take Madame Rothchild's diamond necklace, if you could do so without danger of discovery," she said impertinently.

"Precisely. Just like that," was the soft reply; and Jane noticed that Dema's eyes were still filled with that dreamy, far-away expression.

"You are more than half in love with this Nick Carter already," she sneered again.

"You are right, Jane. I am not like other women. I am like the tigress. I know what I desire whenever and wherever I see it—and I take it without the asking, and in defiance of all things. There was always something wild within me, Jane; something that is untamable, exactly as it is impossible to tame entirely the tiger cub, or the young of the ruffled grouse, or the eagle."

Jane sneered again, but she was far too wise to say anything now.

And the countess continued dreamily:

"Just now when I stood with him there under the palms, when he took my hand and kissed the back of it again and again, and when I touched his lips with the tips of my fingers, I felt as if flames of fire were sweeping through my whole being and consuming me where I stood. I could have thrown myself on the ground at his feet at that moment and have rendered up my very soul to that man.

"Not to the man as *you* saw him; understand that. Not to the man as the world sees him; not to the disguised individual who is here in this house, playing a part that is as deep as my own; not to the outward and visible intelligence that is perceptible to every person who might brush against him in passing; not to any of these; no. But to the magic that is in the being that I recognized through the mask he wears; to the spirit that glows within him; to the magnetism which glows in his veins and which finds expression in the touch of his hands; to the electric forces which tingled through me like touches upon a lute, when his lips touched my hand. God, Jane! It was wonderful! Wonderful! The exaltations that thrilled through me then. I could have cried out with ecstasy! I could have screamed with joy incarnate! I could have thrown my arms around his neck, and have called out to him: 'I am yours, *yours, yours!*"

"And you'd have done a fine thing if you had, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. It might have been a fatal thing—for one of us."

"Yes. For *you*. Not for him. He bears a charmed life. He is immune from such as you."

"Not so fast, Jane; not so fast. I see that you do not half know me yet."

"No; nor do you half know yourself, when you permit yourself to indulge in such wild fantasies as these."

"Bah! You are a fool, Jane. I have likened myself to a tigress, and the simile is a wise one. Like a tigress, I can kill; like a tigress, I can devour. I have not been named Dema the Dangerous for nothing."

"Oh, I know that, my lady."

"Listen to me. I shall go back to him now. I shall keep him there in the conservatory until long after the guests in the drawing-room have departed. I shall hold him there by the spell of my presence. I shall breathe love into his very soul. I shall make him tremble and catch his breath, and swear to himself that never before has he met such an one as I. I shall draw him down to his knees before me, as the magnet attracts the needle to itself. I shall make him love me—and kiss me; and as he kisses me—as he kisses me I will open to him either a heaven or a hell, according as he responds to me. Do you understand that?"

"You mean, I suppose——" sneered Jane; but again the countess interrupted her.

"Bah! Shut up! You are a fool! I mean that he shall have the heaven of my love, or the hell of my hate, just as he wills it."

"It will be the latter. You need have no misgivings on that point. Nick Carter's love is not for you, Dema."

The beautiful woman raised her hand and pointed toward a door which was behind the English woman.

"Go!" she commanded. "I have done with trifling. Go and find if Clarice has arrayed herself as the duchess as yet, and if she has gone to the salon. If she has not done so, see to it that she loses no more time in accomplishing it, or she will have to reckon with me. And while you are about it find also Chester Mayne. See what he is doing. You have said that he spied upon me while I was there in the conservatory. Tell him that I know about it, and that if he does it again this night, or so much as comes near to where I am, he will suffer for it as I have never made him suffer before."

"You cannot expect him to look with complacence upon a scene in which you are permitting yourself to fall in love with another man," muttered Jane.

"Tell him what I have said. Tell him that he tires me; that he angers me, and that there is an empty grave yawning for him unless he changes his ways.

"Tell him, and tell yourself, that if either of you dare to enter the conservatory again to-night, unless it be in response to my bidding, I will kill you as I would crush a fly that annoyed me by buzzing in my ears.

"Tell Clarice that, also. Tell her to rid herself of her company as soon as she can. I want the house cleared; and when all have departed——"

"You forget that there is the man—he calls himself Pierot—who came with Nick Carter. He will ask for his companion. He will wish to know what has become of him."

"Tell him, then, that his friend has already departed; or tell him to go to the devil; I care not which."

"If," said Jane dryly, "if, as I suspect, the man who calls himself Pierot is in reality chief of the secret service department of the police, he may not believe the first part of your message to him, and he may not follow the advice contained in the second part."

"Ah! You think he is the chief?"

"I am almost certain of it—and so is Chester Mayne."

"Then you can do better than to send him away. You can tell him that his friend awaits him in the boudoir parlor of the second floor; and when you have taken him there——"

"I can close the door and fasten him inside; eh?"

"Yes. He cannot get out until we choose to permit it. You may rest assured that if Pierot *is* the chief in disguise, that there is not a man in all Paris, save the one who came here with him, who knows where he is to-night. Stronger men than he have been locked inside that little room, and they have——"

"Died there." Jane completed the sentence for her. And then she added: "You forget the other man of the party. You have forgotten Dalney."

"Dalney? No, I have not. Dalney is a fool and a traitor. Do you suppose for a moment that the chief does not know that? Do you think that he would trust Dalney with his secret? Not at all. Go, now, and do as I bid you."

"You are impatient, De——"

Dema plucked a dagger from her bosom and took a quick step toward Jane.

"You seem to court death, my winsome Jane," she exclaimed. "Will you go and do as I tell you, without more words, or will you compel me to slay you where you stand?"

The woman started backward so precipitously that she almost fell to the floor, and her face paled visibly. She knew her mistress so well that she realized fully that she was indeed near to death at that instant. Dema the Dangerous never indulged in idle threats. She had at least that reputation among those who knew her.

"Go, now!" Dema ordered again; and Jane faded away past the door, closing it behind her, and leaving her mistress alone in the little room.

And then Dema became instantly again the countess. Her fury was like a cloud which passes across the disk of the sun—it was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

For several moments she remained there where she was, deep in thought; and then she roused herself and turned slowly away, passing again into the conservatory, and thence making her way among the blossoms and plants toward the bench where she had left the detective awaiting her.

Her eyes were bent toward the ground as she entered the conservatory and walked toward him, and therefore she did not see what she might have seen; but it was nevertheless a fact that Nick Carter reached the bench but a moment in advance of her, and that he had barely resumed the attitude in which she had left him at the time of her departure when she was again by his side.

But sharp as she was, she observed none of this at all.

She did not know that when she left his side, bidding him await her return, he had risen instantly and followed her; but it was true.

The detective had come to Paris to rescue Imogene Clancy from the toils of this woman, and to convoy her safely back again to the school of Madame Duclos, and it was no part of his intentions or mode of procedure to permit anything to stand in the way of the accomplishment of this high purpose.

That was why he had chosen to follow the countess and to spy upon her when she left him; and that was how it happened that he saw the meeting between her and Jane Golden.

Of course, he recognized Jane instantly now. He would have recognized her on the steamer had he been permitted to see her; but acting as one of the stewardesses, it had been easy for her to keep out of his way, and to watch him without herself being observed.

But he saw her there in the conservatory when the countess encountered her, and when they went together into the little room where they indulged in the significant conversation that we have already witnessed, he was near enough to hear all that was said.

Form your own conclusions as to the course he determined to adopt from that moment.

He had known all along, of course, that Mercedes, Countess of Echeveria, was Dema the Dangerous; and yet, notwithstanding the possession of that knowledge, there had been a sort of glamour around her all the time; a glamour like the down—sometimes called the flour—of the wing of a butterfly; but the conversation he had overheard had brushed away that glamour.

The countess—like the butterfly—might have flown into his graces, or very fairly into them, before that; but now with the down brushed off, and all the real hideousness of the character of the woman exposed—well, it was all quite different.

She had been beautiful to him until that moment: beautiful even though he knew that there was ugliness behind and underneath the beauty; but now she was no longer even that. She had influenced him before by the very strength of her passionate magetism—but now all

her wonderful power had transferred itself to the negative pole, so that when she rejoined him upon the bench under the palms, when she dropped down upon the seat beside him, and permitted her speaking eyes to dwell upon his own, and to rest there with all the power of a tigress' love glowing in them, he shuddered instead of gasped; he shrank within himself, instead of feeling that vague fear and wonder which had influenced him a little while ago.

"You have returned, countess," he said, in a low tone to her; and she replied:

"Yes, yes. I could not have remained away if I would."

CHAPTER XI.

THE FURY OF A WOMAN SCORNED.

Even as the beautiful woman seated herself beside him, the detective could hear noises proceeding from the salon which told him that the company was already departing, and that the orders of the countess were being carried out.

He wondered when he thought of it where that "parlor boudoir" to which the woman had referred as the place to which the chief of detectives was to be lured and imprisoned, was located; but he devoted no thought to it especially, for the reason that it did not occur to him that the chief would be in any immediate danger because of the imprisonment.

It only went to show, however, how little he really knew of the possibilities of Dema the Dangerous, and how expert she was in ridding herself of unpleasant people.

Just now the detective gave his entire attention to her; and indeed she demanded it, claimed it, held it by her manner and her attitude toward him.

He wondered just a little what her process of making love to him was to be, for that she did intend to make love to him had been evident from her conversation with Jane Golden.

He was not long to remain in doubt, for even as she seated herself beside him she permitted her hand, as if by accident, to fall upon one of his own.

That she instantly and quickly withdrew it was nothing. It was the act itself that affected Nick, for he knew it to be intentional; and he could have scolded himself roundly had the opportunity offered, for the thrill which that touch shot through him in spite of his thorough knowledge of her tactics, and his resolution not to allow himself to be affected by anything that she did.

But there was the thrill.

He could not have dodged it. It was there. And although there was thoroughly a sense of repulsion with it, it affected him none the less; and because of that he was conscious that his face and forehead flushed unpleasantly under the pigment with which he had covered it in assuming the disguise he wore.

And a word as to that disguise, for it was really not much.

The detective was a thorough believer in the idea that too much disguise was usually fatal, and his favorite plan was to alterations in his appearance, which, each in itself, was not to be noticed at all, but which, collectively, altered the entire aspect of the man.

Just now it was Nick Carter's face into which the eyes of the woman were peering; but upon it and around it was that collection of changes and alterations which rendered it impossible for one to see beneath the mask.

He had changed himself into a sandy-haired blond, that was all; and to that he had added a close-cropped sandy mustache and a tuft of hair of the same color beneath his nether lip. He had arched his eyebrows somewhat, too, and had made them much heavier, and of course of a color to match the other hair, and with a pair of eye-glasses adorning his nose the change was truly amazing.

Always handsome in the eyes of women, Nick had in this instance spoiled none of his natural attractions in the change he had wrought, and just now he was conscious that his companion was gazing upon him with ill-concealed admiration in her looks and manner.

"It is extremely kind of you to say that," he murmured, in reply to her remark that she could not have remained away if she would; and he permitted his own hand to steal toward hers—the one which she had dropped upon his and then so hastily withdrawn.

But this time she did not withdraw her hand.

She permitted it to remain beneath his; but she turned her head half away, as coy and as tantalizing as only a beautiful woman can become at will.

Again that thrill stormed through Nick Carter's veins—that impulse, which he so deeply resented in himself, to seize the woman in his arms and crush her against him.

And now she turned her rapturous face toward him, fixing her dreamy eyes upon him, breathing upon him, so that he could feel the touch of it against his cheeks; warming him; angering him; maddening him; repulsing him; drawing him toward her with a power that was almost resistless, and at the same time filling him with a vague fear of himself, of his own powers of resistance, and for the outcome of this interview.

And then she played a masterly stroke.

He was not looking for it, not expecting it; and it came, therefore, totally without warning.

Of a sudden she snatched her hand away from beneath his—she started as if to rise from the bench where they were seated, but instead of doing that she turned, and with a little cry half of fright, half of exultation and wholly of passion, she flung herself upon him, winding her pliant arms around his neck, pressing the bare flesh

of them against him, drawing him irresistibly toward her, and—before he was aware of it or could avoid it, her lips met his own and for the moment he was as much a prisoner as if he had been hung with chains.

It was a delirious moment, that one.

While it lasted the world seemed to have come to an end, and everything on earth was turned to chaos.

While it lasted Nick Carter's head swam with dizziness, and he never knew—he does not know to this day—if he returned those kisses, or if he did not.

What would you have done had you been in his place just then?

Do not reply; it is not necessary; but let us see what he did.

That first moment of deliriousness was the danger-signal to Nick Carter.

He realized then that it would never do to permit himself to live through another age of time like that one; an eon of time condensed into seconds.

He tore himself away from her as if he had been in contact with a hideous corpse, and he started to his feet and stood in front of her, panting just a little, but more because of the exertion of rising than from any other cause.

She misunderstood his act, and only smiled up at him until he spoke; and then her smile gradually gave place to a frown which deepened as he proceeded, until her eyes were ablaze with anger, and her teeth had set tightly together in an excess of passionate rage.

"Stop!" he cried, when he started to his feet. "No more of this. We but play at fate—you and I. We each act a part, while as a matter of fact it is no longer necessary that either of us should do so. You are Dema the Dangerous and I am Nick Carter. You know the truth and I know the truth. Why, then, should we continue this farce any longer?"

For a full minute she made no reply; and then the anger which had flown into her face suddenly, gradually, disappeared.

Her eyes became dreamy, contemplative, again, as if she were looking back upon some thought that had been pleasant to her; and she murmured:

"Why, indeed?"

He said nothing more at that moment, and after a little she continued:

"You are Nick Carter, you say? Yes, I knew it; but what difference can that make in—in the present situation?"

"It seems to me that it makes all the difference in the world," he replied.

"No. The fact that you are Nick Carter, that you came here in pursuit of me, that you are supposed to be my enemy, and all that—those facts could not change or alter the thrill which almost engulfed us both a moment since, when we felt the pressure of each other's hands and the touch of lips against lips. The fact that you are Nick Carter, or what you came to this house representing yourself to be, and that I am Dema, or the countess, or any other woman, can make no appreciable difference where love lives—can it?"

"Do you suppose," said Nick; "do you suppose for a moment that I could love—*you?* Am I such an ass or are you such a fool that either of us should mistake an instant of madness for love?"

She laughed at this.

She had brought him to the point of argument, and she did not despair of winning.

And then the detective went on rapidly:

"You have a prisoner here—a young girl who is my ward, and who is in fact your niece—whom I have come here to rescue and to take back to New York with me."

"Yes," replied Dema calmly. "She is here. Imogene is here. She is quite well. She has not been harmed. She has received the best of care—and she is not and has not been unhappy. She is here—and you can have her when you will. I am not sorry that I stole her away—I am glad that I did so, since the act has brought you here—but now I have no further use for her, and you can take her away and return her to the school of Madame Duclos at your own pleasure."

The detective looked the surprise he felt at this statement; and perceiving it she continued:

"In that as in other things—in that as in *all* things, I will find no greater happiness than in doing your will—if you but love me and give expression to your love."

The glamour had all gone now, and Nick could perceive only the hideous truth of things.

Looking down upon the beautiful woman now was like gazing into a deserted ballroom the morning after, when the sun shines through the casement upon all the tinsel and falsity of the thing, revealing in its shadows the truth, and the truth only; and he could only reply to her, with an immensity of scorn in his voice:

"*Love* you! Love *you!*" and then he laughed harshly.

His words and the laugh were like cold water dashed upon her.

They brought her to her feet instantly, and she stood staring upon him enraged. But he continued, without waiting for her to speak:

"Do you not know that when you went out of the conservatory not long since I followed you?"

"I do not care if you did."

"Do you not know that I saw who it was you met? Who it was that you dragged into the little room over there with you? Do you not know that I heard what was said and all that was said during the conversation that followed between you and Jane Golden?"

"I do not care if you did," she repeated.

"And do you suppose that the touch of your hands, or

the touch of your lips, or the touch of your body could mean anything to me after that?" he demanded.

"I know that it did—I know that it does mean something to you," she said quietly, but with a conviction which made him bitterly reproach himself.

"Yes," he replied, "it did mean something. It meant that I was doubly assured that you are ten thousand times more a fiend than I ever supposed you to be. Do you know, Dema Chrisholm, that I saw and talked with your father once? Do you know that then he told me of the love of crime that was born into you when you were brought into the world? Don't you remember that I know that you planned, if you did not personally execute, the murder of your own twin sister? Don't you remember that I know that you deliberately murdered your sister's faithful maid, who was loyal to her? Don't you know that you are responsible for the early death of the father of that child whom you now hold here as a prisoner? Don't you know that *I know* the utter hideousness of your soul, of your heart, of your entire life, and that I would sooner mate with a corpse in a charnel house, than to have aught to do with such as you? You are a living leprosy! You are a repulsive deformity, fashioned by the Almighty, but long since in the service of the devil! You are an abomination on the face of the earth, and a blister upon humanity. God! and you dare to speak the word *love!*"

The expression of her face had changed gradually while he was talking, and in the place of that dreamy, introspective gleam in her eyes, there now appeared one such as can be seen in the yellow orbs of a tiger when it is teased through the bars of its cage.

But she met his tirade with a peal of laughter that rang through the conservatory like a bell; and it was followed by peal after peal of the same sort, until the place seemed alive with it.

And it was not the laugh of mirth; it was the laugh of menace.

"So," she said at last, "that is how you feel now, is it? That is how you will act? And you have come here to this house and thrust yourself into my power, and have dared to tell me such things as that to my face. Nick Carter, though you were ten times more powerful than you are, ten times braver, ten times more of a fighter, you shall die for those words. Nothing can save you now! Nothing can save you from me. Although I appear to stand before you utterly helpless you shall presently be made to feel my power and to know what it is. Your friend and companion, the chief of detectives, is already slowly suffocating; and you—— Oh, you shall die, too, very soon. Have no doubt of that."

CHAPTER XII.

A FEMALE MONSTER CHAINED.

Nick Carter advanced a step toward her, and then he paused.

She had taken a step backward when he moved, and she had drawn that same dagger from her bosom which we saw her exhibit during her interview with Jane.

She held it before his eyes, and again she laughed; but this time her pseudo mirth was low and menacing.

"Stand where you are, Nick Carter," she said, "for I warn you that a mere prick from the point of this weapon would mean death; sudden and terrible death."

"Then, for goodness' sake, scratch yourself with it at once and rid the world of a monstrosity that is worse than a female Frankenstein," replied Nick. "Or, shall I do it for you?"

A couchant tiger, ready to leap upon its prey, could not have moved more quickly than did Nick Carter as he ceased speaking.

He sprang forward with a suddenness that entirely disconcerted her, and in that instant he seized her by both wrists, and held her thus, while he slowly twisted the one that held the dagger, until it dropped to the floor from her nerveless grasp, and a little cry of pain gurgled in her throat.

He swung her around upon the bench then and forced her down upon it; and then, before she could be aware of his intention, he snapped handcuffs upon one of her wrists, fastening the other half of the implement to the frame of the bench.

Then coolly he stepped back a pace, as coolly picked up the dagger and flung it to the farthest end of the conservatory; and then he faced her again.

"The aspect of things seem to have undergone a change," he said to her dryly. "I do not enjoy making war upon women, but save in appearance I have ceased to regard you as such." He dangled a pair of handcuffs before her eyes as he spoke.

"Will you thrust your feet forward, in order that I may fasten these about your ankles without inconveniencing you, or will you prefer that I should use force in doing it? You may as well understand at once that it shall be done."

She hesitated an instant; but then, as he took a step toward her, she understood that it was useless to resist, and she pushed her small feet from beneath the edge of her skirts, so that he quickly snapped the irons in place.

Immediately a third pair appeared from another pocket, and he said dryly:

"And now that disengaged arm of yours, if you please."

There was nothing that she could do save to obey; and so, in another moment, she found herself seated in the middle of the bench, with her arms stretched out at right angles from her body and one of them fastened securely to either end of the bench; and with her ankles

tied together by a steel chain, in the same relentless manner.

Move from that position she could not; and then, with a smile on his inscrutable face, the detective turned abruptly about and left her.

She saw him enter the house.

She saw him pass through the same door which she had entered when she had gone to have that talk with Jane; and then she looked about her on all sides, up and down throughout the conservatory; and at last, being assured that she was entirely alone, she bowed her head upon her breast and wept silently.

Nick Carter, in passing into the main part of the house through that door into the little room, encountered Jane Golden as soon as he had crossed the threshold.

As she started back with a loud cry, upon perceiving him, he sprang forward toward her, and seized her rather roughly.

In an instant she had whipped out an ugly-looking knife, and had made a savage lunge at him with it; but the blade passed harmlessly through the sleeve of his coat as he dodged it—and after that it required but a moment for him to whirl Jane into a chair, to snatch a picture from the wall, to tear the wire cord loose from it, and to bind her securely.

She had maintained an incessant screaming all the time while he was thus employed; but he permitted her to scream on, feeling assured—and the facts proved that he was correct—that the noise made by the woman would not penetrate to other parts of that massively built house.

He left her while she was still screaming at the top of her voice, and dashed through a second door—the one by which Jane had left that room after her interview with Dema.

It took him into the main hallway of the house, and from that he found himself gazing into the great salon reception-room.

It was now utterly deserted. The guests had departed. There was only the general litter of things around the apartment, cards on the floor, and counters scattered over the tables, to testify that others had been there at all.

But the electric lights were all turned on as yet. Not one of them had been extinguished; and what seemed still more strange to the detective was the fact that nowhere was there a servant to be seen around the place, and nowhere could he detect a sound which told him that there was a human being alive in the house.

"The parlor boudoir," he mused to himself. "I wonder where that is?"

He hurried back to the room where he had left Jane, and approaching her he held a pin between his thumb and finger so that she could see it.

"Where is the parlor boudoir, Jane?" he asked. "The place where you have confined the good chief. Tell me that."

She laughed at him; and by way of reply he jabbed the pin not too gently into the flesh of her arm.

"I like to hear you scream," he said mildly. "Answer my question, or I will hear more of it. I shall not be so gentle next time, either."

Cursing him roundly, she nevertheless told him how to find the room, and he darted away from her and up the stairs.

Those who had imprisoned the chief had not been overcareful about it after the door was locked upon him, for the key was in the outside; but as the detective threw the door back on its hinges, he was almost floored by the rush of noxious gas that poured into his face, and through it he could see the apparently lifeless form of the chief, stretched upon the floor.

Holding his breath, the detective dashed into the place and dragged the chief from his dangerous surroundings, after which he again closed and locked the door.

There was wine in plenty in the big reception-room; the detective knew that, and he carried the chief down the stairs and into that room, where he presently dashed a glass of wine into his face and poured another one down his throat.

The effect was almost instantaneous, for the chief gasped and opened his eyes a little; but he as quickly closed them again; and perceiving that he would soon recover the detective left him, and again darted up the stairs.

His one remaining purpose now was to find Imogene as quickly as possible.

At first he thought of returning to Jane again for further information; but second thought convinced him that he could soon find the child without aid, and he continued on his way.

Dema had assured him—and that at a moment when he believed that she was telling him the truth—that Imogene was safe and uninjured; and so he dashed from room to room in search of her, pausing at each one only long enough to assure himself that she was not there.

And in a room at the top of the house—a room that was securely fastened on the outside, although it was sumptuously appointed within—he found her.

He was obliged to break down the door in order to enter the room, and when the barrier crashed into the room and he sprang across the threshold, he found Imogene standing in the middle of the floor, with terror in her eyes, but, nevertheless, with a revolver aimed steadily and determinedly at his heart.

"Imogene!" he called out to her, in his natural tones, for he feared that she would not recognize him; but strangely enough she seemed to know him almost instantly; and as he would have gone to her, she sprang forward and threw herself, weeping, into his arms.

"Come!" he ordered her. "There is no time to lose.

Throw something around you and follow me. It is well that you had not retired. Come."

"I have not taken my clothes off since I entered this house," she answered him, following him down the stairs; and he smiled his approval of her courage. "I begged that pistol of a sailor aboard the ship," she told him rapidly. "I paid him almost all the money I had, too, in order to get it—and some day I would have killed that woman."

"Hush!" said Nick sternly. "Do not talk of killing—ever."

He led Imogene into the reception-room just as the chief of detectives was slowly rising from the couch where Nick had placed him, and the man stared at them in surprise.

"What devil's work is this?" he began; and he would have said more, but at that instant there was the sharp report of a pistol from the far end of the room, and a bullet buried itself in the wall directly over Nick Carter's head.

With lightninglike quickness Nick Carter raised Imogene in his arms and dropped her over behind the couch, where she would be in a measure shielded; and then he turned and leaped toward the man who had fired at them, just as that individual let go a second shot.

The second bullet also flew wild, and before a third one could follow it, Nick had reached the fellow and seized him.

There was just a second or two of the struggle, although Chester Mayne was a large and a powerful man.

But he was as a child in the grasp of the little giant; and after that first instant of fighting, Nick held him off from him with his left hand, while with his right he planted a blow against Chester Mayne's jaw which sent him spinning and whirling across the room to fall at last, limp and senseless, into the arms of the chief.

When a few moments later Nick Carter, followed by the chief, went into the conservatory to look for Dema, he was astounded to find that she as well as the bench to which he had fastened her, had disappeared.

But there were marks upon the floor where she had dragged it away, and the detective followed them around the winding way past the palms, until he found——

Dema the Dangerous was stretched upon the floor of the conservatory, dead, and beside her was the poisoned dagger which Nick Carter had flung away when he took it from her.

She had managed to drag herself to it, and thus to find and use it.

To accomplish the latter, she had been compelled to overturn the bench, and to work her way along the floor until she could touch the poisoned weapon.

But she was dead, stone dead, and her career was ended forever.

It never appeared why all the servants had fled at that particular time, but there was not one to be found in the house, and, save for the few persons concerned in this tale, the place was deserted.

Nick Carter's chase to Paris had borne quick fruit; and so, we write

THE END.

The next issue, No. 483, will be "Nick Carter's Murder Problem; or, A Hide-and-Seek Game with the Dead."

About the Early Numbers of

Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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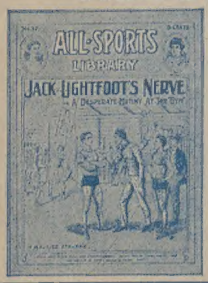

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